My Big Sister Lives in a Fantasy World

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Illust. An2A

Monika Sakurazaki
A Worldview Holder. Wants to get back the Soul Reader power that Yuichi stole from her.
"WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?!"
"AND SO ***** THE $$$$$ TO *****, AND YOU @@@@@, AND THAT'S HOW SOUL READER BECAME YOURS."
My Big Sister
LIVES IN A
FANTASY WORLD
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THE MELANCHOLY OF THE HIGH SCHOOL GIRL LIGHT NOVEL AUTHOR?!
Chapter 1: An Eventful Road to the 2nd Term

There was a knight in armor standing at the entrance to the school building. There was something familiar about that armor. It looked like the set that had fallen on the roof a few days before.
Twelve Hell Kings
WHO... THE HELL IS THAT?
"YU! DO YOU THINK THIS IS AN ATTACK BY A NEW STAND-USER?"
Chapter 6: In Imitation of the Half-Isekai Classroom

Chapter 2: No One Cared About the Absent Club Members

Kanako's knees had been knocking the entire time they had been on the roof. Yuichi hadn't realized she would be this frightened, but now that they were there, it was hard to ask her to lay off.

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Prologue: Kanako Orihara Is Cursed

Kanako Orihara first met Mutsuko Sakaki on the day she tried to kill herself.

Kanako was sure this strange girl must have come from another world or time — an isekai.

When she thought about it rationally, she knew that this girl had just stepped onto the elevator when it had stopped at the fourth floor. But the girl was so beautiful, it was hard to believe she was of this world. She must have come from another.

Her appearance only encouraged Kanako's misconception. It was difficult to describe, in a way that made it hard to believe she could possibly be from their modern-day world.

She had beautiful black hair that hung down to her hips. Kanako had never seen a girl with such long hair before.

Over her chest, she wore a mesh-patterned tunic that looked like chain mail. On her shoulders and hips were layered plate protectors that shone in silver. In Japanese-style armor they would be called "sode" and "kusazuri," but the layering more resembled that of Western-style armor.

A long, narrow black box with an LED display and keyboard was attached to her left forearm. It appeared to be a computer.

Her appearance blended Japanese and Western styles in a futuristic way. It seemed to Kanako very much like isekai fashion.

Did it work? Kanako wondered.

She had tried, on a whim, a ritual that was supposed to take a person to an isekai. But she hadn't really believed that it would work. Not for a second.

The next thing she knew, the elevator door was closing. She was alone in a small room with this strange girl.

The girl peered into Kanako's face with her wide, round eyes. In the face of this violation of personal space, Kanako began opening her mouth. But then she remembered:

You're not supposed to speak...

The girl who had gotten on at the fourth floor was a resident of an isekai. If Kanako spoke, the ritual would fail.

Kanako thought back on the steps of the ritual. When someone got on, you were to press the button for the first floor. Then, even though you had pressed the first floor button, the elevator would start heading for the top floor.

Timidly, Kanako pressed the first floor button. The elevator started to move. Kanako looked up at the floor display, her expression nervous.

Third floor.

The elevator had begun to go down... which was only natural, really. But Kanako was disappointed.

"Huh?"

As they arrived at the first floor, the girl burst out laughing.

"Hey! Were you surprised? Were you?" the girl addressed her, bubbling over with curiosity. "I'm sorry," she continued. "I kept seeing the elevator go up and down, and I felt like I just had to tease you!"

"Um..." Kanako said hesitantly. The change of situation was too sudden for her to deal with right away.

"You were doing the Isekai Elevator, right? So I thought I'd get on at the fourth floor and shock you. I just couldn't help myself! I'm sorry for getting in the way, but you've been trying it since noon with no success! ...Ah! I'm sorry! Were you taking it really seriously? Sorry!" Apparently thinking Kanako had gotten angry, the girl fervently began apologizing.

"No, it's okay," Kanako said. "That wasn't what I really came here for, and I knew it wouldn't work, anyway... though I was surprised."

While she was quiet, the girl had seemed very mature, but her childish way of laughing made Kanako realize they were roughly the same age. She suddenly didn't seem like an isekai denizen in the slightest.

"Oh, yeah! I'm Mutsuko Sakaki," the girl said. "Who are you?"

"Kanako Orihara," Kanako responded curtly, unable to think of a better response.

But Mutsuko showed no signs of being offended by her brusque manner. "So, what were you really after?" she asked.

"Um, I was thinking of going to the roof," Kanako said.

"Oh, what a coincidence! That's where I was going! Ah! And while we're fooling around here, I bet Yu's up there waiting!" Mutsuko quickly pressed the button for the 11th floor. She apparently wasn't even considering that Kanako might want to get off. "Why do you want to go to the roof? Oh, I have a goal, personally. I'll tell you later! So tell me yours too, Orihara!" Mutsuko babbled curiously.

Kanako couldn't help but feel swept along by her fervor. She didn't like that feeling. She had worked up her nerve to come here. She had felt that what she was about to do should be done quietly, and now that mood had changed in some indescribable way.

So, Kanako decided to surprise her. "I'm going to kill myself," she said.

The girl wouldn't know how to respond to that, would she? Just a

tiny bit of revenge. She wanted to see this strange girl acting flustered.

"That's boring!"

"Huh?"

But it was Kanako who was once again flustered by Mutsuko's immediate response.

"You're going to the roof to commit suicide?" Mutsuko complained. "What a cliché! Can't you be a sniper rehearsing a shot or something?"

"W-Well, sorry!" Kanako apologized in the face of what felt like outrage directed at her.

"Or how about this?" Mutsuko asked. "You're raising bizarre plants in secret up on the roof! You go to see them at regular intervals, but it's been so long that now the roof is covered in greenery, and it's going to lead to the end of the world! That'd be way better!"

Why was this girl she had only just met a few minutes before deciding this all on her own? Before Kanako could figure out a reasonable answer, the elevator arrived on the 11th floor.

Mutsuko stepped out immediately, and Kanako hurried after her.

The minute Mutsuko was out, Kanako looked right up at the ceiling. The entrance to the roof was there. There were steps mounted on the wall that started halfway up, and a hatch in the ceiling. But the hatch was shut and padlocked.

Kanako could have laughed. She hadn't been expecting that.

She had done a lot of research on suicide, and in the end, she had decided that she would jump off a building. She had chosen an apartment complex tall enough for the fall to kill her immediately, and had practiced slipping through the auto-locking doors. Yet in the end, would she be stopped by something so simple?

"Orihara! Can you pick locks?" Mutsuko's words snapped her out of her self-recrimination.

"Ah? What's that?" Kanako asked.

"I mean undoing the lock," Mutsuko said. "Look, there's a padlock on the hatch, right? But if you can't do it, I'll just have to go up myself. Could you just crouch there?"

Kanako squatted by the wall just as she was told.

Mutsuko kicked off her shoes and stepped onto Kanako's shoulders. Kanako felt her weight on her for a second, but Mutsuko immediately moved on to the steps.

She looked up and saw Mutsuko fiddling with the padlock. A second later, it fell.

"Um, but I can't climb up like this..." Kanako protested.

"Just hold on!" Mutsuko opened the hatch and peeked out onto the roof. "Yu!"

"Hey, Sis, took you long enough," a male voice responded. "What

were you doing?"

Kanako was surprised. This should have been the only way onto the roof. How could someone else be up there?

"Hey, Orihara, can you climb a rope?" Mutsuko asked.

"I don't think so..." Kanako's arms were so slender, she couldn't even hold on to a rope for long periods of time.

"Then we'll have Yu do it," Mutsuko said. "Yu! C'mere a minute! There's someone else I want to bring up!" While calling to him, Mutsuko disappeared onto the roof.

"Someone else? Who are you talking about?" The boy who had been speaking jumped down out of the hatch.

"That girl. Bring her up, okay?" Mutsuko said, poking her head out from the hatch, as well.

"Um, hello," the boy said shyly as he looked at Kanako.

"Hello," Kanako smiled.

The boy was dressed in a T-shirt and shorts, and he looked like an elementary school student. He had a pretty face that resembled Mutsuko's. Since he called her "Sis," he must have been her little brother.

"Is it okay if I carry you?" he asked.

Kanako nodded.

He wrapped his arm around her waist. Kanako was surprised by how strong the arm felt.

The boy held Kanako in one arm as he jumped back up and grabbed the step.

Just as she wondered how he was going to do anything with one hand, the boy let go for one instant then grabbed the next step up. He did it again and again until they were on the roof in no time.

It felt noticeably hotter up on the roof. She couldn't help but think it was because they were closer to the sun.

"Yu! Why didn't you bring my shoes? You're so thoughtless!" Mutsuko complained.

"How was I supposed to get your shoes? I was carrying a person! Fine, fine, I'll go get them..."

While the siblings sparred, Kanako looked around the roof. It was a wide open space with no distinguishing features. There was no fence of any kind around it. It would be very easy to jump off.

"Were you expecting a water tank or something?" Mutsuko asked, as if reading her mind. "Lots of complexes don't have them nowadays! This one uses intermediate tanks and pressure pumps to bring water to each apartment!"

"You know a lot about it..." Kanako said. She had no interest in that particular subject, but she was still pleased by this expansion of her knowledge.

“That’s nothing! There are a lot of apartment complexes in the city, so knowing what goes into them is an important survival technique! Oh, this is my little brother, Yu!” Mutsuko pointed out her brother, who was returning with the shoes, as if having forgotten him completely until she was already in the middle of her spiel.

“That’s not an introduction,” he grumbled. “Um, I’m Yuichi Sakaki.” He gave her a formal bow.

“Kanako Orihara. What are you two doing here?”

“I’m training Yu!” Mutsuko said as she replaced her shoes.

Kanako tilted her head in confusion.

“He’s climbing up and down the walls of the apartment building!” Mutsuko proclaimed. “Oh, climbing mountains is fine, but man’s modern frontier is the big city. Scaling skyscrapers is an important skill! That reminds me, Orihara, did you say you were gonna kill yourself? Is it because you’re bullied? I can see it! You’re pretty! I bet lots of people get jealous and want to bully you!” Mutsuko broached what most people would have considered to be an awkward subject without hesitation.

Kanako didn’t respond. This girl couldn’t possibly understand.

“Well, I guess that’s reason enough to want to kill yourself, but if the bullying’s gotten to ‘kill yourself’ levels, you should kill the bullies instead,” Mutsuko said. “It’s better than killing yourself, right? You look like you’re in middle school like me, so even if they caught you, you wouldn’t get the death penalty!”

“Sis... that’s not helping,” the boy said.

“Really? Okay, then, why not tell the police?” Mutsuko asked, undaunted. “You can also hire a lawyer, go to the PTA, confer with the Ministry of Education, or file a human rights complaint with the Ministry of Justice. I know that when you’re in middle school, you’re convinced that that’s all there is, but the world is really big! There are lots of things you can try! If you want to figure it out, I’ll help you!” Mutsuko clapped a hand to her chest, eyes shining as she walked right into Kanako’s personal space.

“Don’t ask my sister for help unless you want to see blood raining down from the sky,” the boy said. “Anyway, she didn’t say anything about bullying, and she could be joking about killing herself, so slow down a little, okay?”

Yuichi’s wincing admonishment suggested he found his sister’s behavior a bit rude. Compared to her, his thought processes seemed to be rather normal.

“Are you calling my judgment into question?!” Mutsuko exclaimed.

“It’s been mistaken plenty of times before!” he shot back.

Yuichi’s response was fraught with complicated emotions. He

must have suffered frequently at his sister's hands.

"Well, whatever!" Mutsuko seemed to recognize that, because she turned quickly away from him to look back at Kanako. "Anyway, life is important! Once you're dead, there's nothing else. Game over. It's one thing to risk your life for what you believe, but suicide is out of bounds! It's a loser's way of thinking! Utterly unforgivable!"

Why did Mutsuko, this girl she had just met, feel so strongly about this? Kanako couldn't understand.

"What? You're basically saying 'wanting to die makers you a useless loser, so go ahead and die already!' That's not helping..." Yuichi muttered, clearly finding it ridiculous.

"But setting that aside... Orihara, may I show you something?" Mutsuko ignored Yuichi's complaint, and without waiting for a response from Kanako, began striding to the edge of the roof. Kanako and Yuichi came along with her.

There was a lip around the roof a mere 30 cm tall. Mutsuko jumped up onto it easily. Although Kanako had come here to jump off, she couldn't do the same.

Kanako timidly leaned over and gazed down at the scenery below. The people and the cars all looked so small. It sent a chill up her spine.

"We're on the roof of an 11-story building," Mutsuko explained. "Each floor is about three meters, for a total of around 33 meters. Ignoring wind resistance, we can calculate that you'd hit the ground at about 91 kilometers per hour. Impact would come in about 2.5 seconds. It's not a direct comparison, but imagine a car crashing into the wall at 91 kilometers per hour. Right? You've read *that*, right, Orihara?"

Kanako immediately knew what "that" referred to. It was a bestselling book about suicide that had been published before Kanako was born. It was true that it had been what inspired Kanako to jump. According to that book, to commit suicide by falling, you needed a height of 20 meters. About seven or eight stories. That was why she had chosen this 11-story building.

"Anyone who fell from here would definitely die," Mutsuko said. "Is that what you think?"

"Yes. It is concrete below. That's enough to kill anyone." Kanako had investigated that much. Below them was the concrete entrance. No matter how she fell, she would die without question.

"I see," Mutsuko said. "Now, excuse me, Orihara, but I need you to reconsider your suicide! Even if I have to take drastic measures!"

"Drastic measures?" Did she intend to hold her down? But Kanako no longer had any intention of killing herself here. She would do it somewhere else, another time.

“Yu! Come here!” Mutsuko called to Yuichi without answering Kanako’s question.

Yuichi came and stood obediently at Mutsuko’s side.

What happened next, Kanako would never forget.

“Hiyah!” Mutsuko let out an offhanded cry, and gave Yuichi a hard kick.

Yuichi began to fall. His face was contorted in shock. He reached out his hand to try to grab something, but Mutsuko just brushed it away.

It all happened in an instant, but to Kanako it felt like forever.

It was a sight that immediately drained the blood from her face.

Yuichi’s body tilted. He was falling off the side of the roof. Once he was completely out of sight, Kanako felt her legs grow limp.

Yuichi had fallen off the roof. In other words, he was dead. The clear realization of that caused Kanako’s mind to go blank.

“Orihara! Orihara!” Mutsuko’s fervent yelling snapped her back to reality.

For a minute, Kanako had no idea what was going on. Then she remembered the sight of someone falling off a building.

She turned pale and sat up quickly.

“You surprised me, fainting like that!” Mutsuko exclaimed.

“Thank goodness. I was really worried...”

Mutsuko and Yuichi were looking down at her in concern.

“What?” Kanako asked. She was certain that Yuichi had fallen. Or had that been simply a waking dream?

“It’s okay,” Yuichi said. “I righted my posture and grabbed on to the wall. I used friction to slow my descent and ran down at a diagonal.” Yuichi’s explanation answered Kanako’s question.

“I was hoping it would serve as shock treatment, but I didn’t think you’d really faint!” Mutsuko cried.

“Shock treatment?! That was so sudden, I could have died!” Yuichi exclaimed.

“Oh, come on,” Mutsuko said. “You should have been ready the minute I told you to come over! It wouldn’t be very good training if I said, ‘Hey, I’m gonna push you off now!’ would it?”

Yuichi protested violently, and Mutsuko deflected it casually, and Kanako watched it all with eyes glazed over.

It certainly had been shocking.

Kanako had thought that Yuichi had died.

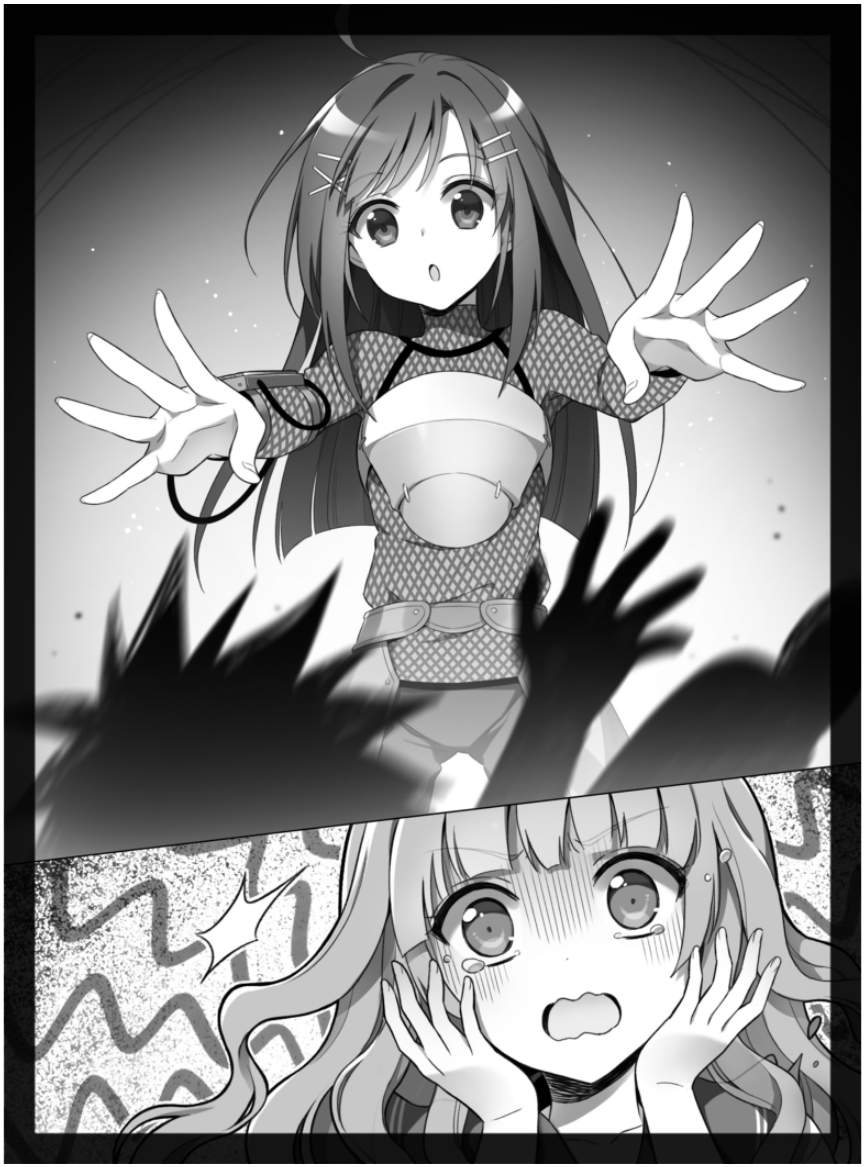
Could a person’s death really cause that much heartache? The realization overwhelmed her.

Even knowing that Yuichi was still alive, she couldn’t stop her heart from pounding. It hurt to breathe.

This was a curse. An image of death had been carved deeply onto

her soul, and put a spell upon her heart.

Ever since then, Kanako had been unable to even think about suicide.



Chapter 1: An Eventful Road to the 2nd Term

A girl of roughly elementary school age was hard at work on a plate of strawberry waffles.

They were sitting in a cafe with a modern atmosphere. It was evening, but the restaurant's lighting kept things as bright as day. Yuichi was at a table by the window, gazing at the girl sitting across from him with a skeptical expression.

"You said you were in trouble, right?" Aiko Noro, a petite girl his age sitting in the seat beside him, looked confused.

It was a table with seating for four. The little girl was sitting across from Yuichi and Aiko.

"Looks like she's given her snack first priority," Yuichi commented.

The little girl's white blouse, green butterfly necktie, and indigo skirt suggested an elementary school uniform. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail with a scrunchie. She was a dainty girl, with an aura of youthful innocence still about her.

This had been the first summer vacation of his high school career. Yuichi and the rest of their survival club, of which Mutsuko was the president, had gone to the suspicious Kurokami Island for a training camp. Various strange incidents had befallen them there, but they'd worked through them. Then, mere minutes after arriving back in the city, he had been confronted by this girl.

It would have looked very bad, from a societal perspective, to have an argument with a child in the middle of foot traffic. And what they had to talk about wasn't something that should be discussed standing around, either. So they had gone to a cafe with a calming atmosphere, and taken the seat closest to the front window.

Through the window, he could see a dog sitting outside, faithfully. It was the wolfman, Nero. He was in dog form, so naturally he couldn't enter the restaurant.

"Is Soul Reader a thing that can be given and returned?" Aiko asked Yuichi, referring back to what had started this whole conversation.

There you are! Hey! Give Soul Reader back! I'm gonna be in big trouble without it! the girl had said to him.

"Dunno," he said. "I've never even thought about it."

Soul Reader was the ability to see words over a person's head. The labels seemed to reveal something about that person's character.

Yuichi could still see those words, even now. Aiko beside him was "Love Interest," and the people in the restaurant were "Housewife," "Businessman," "Waiter," and the like. Outside, the label over Nero's head was "Fenrir." But alone out of all of them, the girl stuffing her face with sweets had no label.

Yuichi had seen a lot of different labels since the ability had first manifested, but this was the first time seeing someone with no label at all.

Yuichi had been trying to ignore the ability. If he could give it back, he'd be happy to. But he had no memory of ever taking it from someone, and he had no idea how to return it.

This isn't going to involve gouging my eyes out, is it? Yuichi wondered, remembering something his big sister, Mutsuko had said.

He spoke up. "I don't know you. But you know me, right? If you could explain the circumstances, I'd really appreciate it."

This girl was clearly someone extraordinary. She knew about Soul Reader, and the fact that there was no label over her head made her even more suspicious.

"Juffacombum..." The girl sputtered through full cheeks. It looked like she wouldn't be able to speak for a while. The girl had a rather mature air about her, despite her age, but she was clearly still a child when it came to her treats.

"You know, Sis would have picked a seat further to the back," Yuichi said to Aiko to kill time. "Avoiding the window side."

"Why?" Aiko asked back in confusion.

"To be on guard in case of an attack," he replied. "It also lets her stake out a position where she can see the whole restaurant, and check everyone who comes in and leaves."

"But you don't do that, Sakaki?" Aiko asked.

"No way. It's a pain in the butt. Who would even attack us, anyway?"

"Huh? Knowing you, lots of people..." Aiko said, looking surprised.

Yuichi decided not to say any more on the subject.

At last, the girl finished her waffle and patted her stomach in satisfaction. "That was delicious! Thank you!"

Apparently, dessert was on them. But it was hard to argue with an elementary schooler about money, so Yuichi just grimaced and accepted it.

"So? We have no idea what's going on, by the way," Yuichi addressed the girl once more.

"Listen, I just want to get Soul Reader back, so is there any way

you can return it without any more questions and say goodbye?" the girl asked.

"I'd be all for it, personally," Yuichi said. "But is it going to make trouble for me later down the line?"

Yuichi would certainly love to give Soul Reader back, and if she didn't want to explain the reason why, he wouldn't force her to talk. But he felt uneasy not knowing the circumstances around it. Just giving it back wouldn't necessarily free him from what was going on.

"Good point," the girl said. "Well, the parts I can tell definitely make for a strange story..." She folded her arms and scowled thoughtfully.

"I've been through a lot of weird stuff thanks to these eyes already. We're pretty immunized to weird stories by now, right?" Yuichi cast a glance over at Aiko.

She nodded. There was an empathy between them, as two people who had been through a number of bizarre situations together.

"We haven't introduced ourselves yet, have we?" the girl asked. "I'm Monika Sakurazaki. How about you guys?" Monika spoke plainly, perhaps relieved by their attitude.

"I'm Yuichi Sakaki."

"I'm Aiko Noro, Sakaki's classmate. Nice to meet you."

"Yuichi and Aiko, huh?" Monika asked. "Nice to meet you!"

"Right to first names, huh?" Aiko scowled, apparently not fond of being addressed so informally by someone so much younger than her.

"Hey, chill out. You guys can call me Monika, too. Now, about the story... let me ask, do you know the term 'Worldview Holder'?" the girl asked, experimentally.

"I know a fair bit." Yuichi had heard a lot about worldviews and Worldview Holders from his classmate Tomomi. The idea was that everyone lived in their own world, and there were as many worlds as there were people. "Worldview" referred to the laws governing a given world.

While there were billions of worlds out there, they were fundamentally the same in most regards, which was why they could all come together to make a single, consistent world, despite minor differences.

But some worlds went far beyond "minor" differences. Those highly divergent worlds all had a central figure — that world's personification — known as the Worldview Holder.

Aiko probably didn't know any of this, but Yuichi decided he would explain after, and urged the girl too continue.

"That should speed things up," Monika said. "I'm a Holder, too, and a slightly special one, because I'm aware of what I am. A Holder that becomes aware of its own nature can't stay in their own world.

They're cast out. These special Holders are called Outers."

"What do you mean, 'cast out'?" Yuichi asked.

"There are a few different schools of thought in terms of how of worldviews are perceived, but I view them as stories," she said. "If someone inside the story realizes they're in a story, the story loses its metastructure and ceases to exist. So the world kicks anyone who becomes aware of the story out of the story. Out of their destiny. Or so it's said."

"Then the fact that I can't use Soul Reader to see your label is..."

"Because I'm an Outer. Outers don't have a role in any world." There was venom in Monika's voice as she said the words.

"It sounds like you really hate these Outer people..." *Even though you're one yourself,* Yuichi thought.

"Yeah," she said. "They're rotten to the core. Hopelessly evil, and I'm afraid that I might turn out like that some day. That's why... I want to go back to how things were. That's how all this got started."

"I don't get it," Yuichi said. "Why does existing outside of destiny make someone evil?"

From the way she was talking, they had originally all been human beings. It was hard to understand how you could go from that to "rotten to the core."

"The minute an Outer is cast out of destiny, they become ageless and undying," she said. "For example, how old do you think I am?"

"Ten or so?" Yuichi had pegged her as a fifth grader.

"I'm actually sixteen. I could be going to the same high school you are right now. But I became an Outer in fifth grade, and I've looked like this ever since. The trash Outers have been alive for hundreds of years, without ever changing how they look."

It was hard to believe, but it was true that Monika didn't sound very much like a child right now.

"At first, all they do is angst about being cast out. But soon enough, they get bored, and try to impose themselves on stories. They use the abilities they get from their worldview to alter other people's worlds. They're trash that style themselves as gods. And to humans on the inside, maybe that's what they are. Looking down on humanity from their ivory towers, playing games with destiny... Unreachable to humans on the inside." There was a distaste in Monika's words, suggesting that she didn't want to turn out that way herself.

"What do you mean, 'abilities'?" Yuichi asked. "They have psychic powers or something?"

Just existing outside of destiny didn't seem to make them a threat, but if they had other abilities, that could be a problem.

"They have the power, you could say, to structure their worldviews... to reinforce them, I guess. For instance, my world was

‘A Hopelessly Romantic Little World.’ My worldview’s all about love. My ability is called ‘That First Spark,’ To put it simply, I can manipulate affection.”

“H-How do you use that?” Aiko, who had been previously been staring out into space, suddenly inquired.

“I don’t know if you’re getting your hopes up, but it’s just the power to make someone’s heart race, more or less. And it doesn’t work on people who already know each other. Only people who’ve just met.”

“R-Right...” Aiko was clearly feigning idle curiosity, but she seemed disappointed by the answer.

“Aiko, are you having love troubles?” the girl asked. “We could talk about it sometime. Even without my powers, I’m a love expert. Despite how I look...”

“Huh? Um, well, I’m not sure I could consult with someone who looks like a child about romance...”

“You guys... is this really the time?” Yuichi sighed. It was true that women flourished when talking about romance, but he wished they would at least try to remember the situation they were in.

“Sorry, sorry,” the girl said. “We got off track. I was talking about how I want to be human again, right? And so ***** the $$$$$ to #####, and you @@@@@, and that’s how Soul Reader became yours.”

“What did you just say?” Aiko asked.

“Yeah, I didn’t really catch that,” Yuichi agreed. He could tell she was saying something, but the contents made no sense to him.

“Ah, I guess it’s no use. I’m caught by the restrictions of ‘Distant Memories.’” Monika slumped dejectedly.

She’d have to explain things in a more step-by-step fashion. Just as he was about to ask, Yuichi suddenly seized Aiko with his left arm.

“Huh?” she asked.

Then he reached across the table to grab Monika’s hand with his right, and pulled her away.

“Hey!”

Yuichi then picked both of them up, and kicked off the table to the back of the room. Through the window, he could see the headlights of a truck getting closer.

Right as Yuichi landed, it crashed through the wall of the cafe with a tremendous sound. The truck hit their table and kept on going, stopping only when it crashed into the far wall.

“Huh?” Aiko stared, apparently unable to process this development.

Monika winced, seeming to have some clue as to what was going on.

“It’s like a raid by the yakuza who caught up with me... is that what’s going on?” Yuichi murmured. “And I only noticed it because I was sitting by the window... Calls Sis’s theory into question, huh...”

“You’ve had yakuza after you, too?” Aiko murmured, held in his left arm.

“Does this have something to do with you?” Yuichi asked, scrutinizing Monika, even as he held her in his right arm.

“Um... oh, hey! Isn’t that always the way? You’re in the middle of explaining something important, and someone just has to interrupt!”

“Don’t try to change the subject!” he exclaimed.

“I don’t know how to put it exactly, but in the broad strokes, it’s, you know, that kind of story... One of those fights for a secret treasure that can grant any wish, but only one person can get the wish? That kind of thing.”

“And this is the form the fight takes?!”

The bent door of the truck flew out, and a man drenched in blood descended from it. He was a giant, with clothing that strained atop his bulging muscles. The extremely ordinary jeans and T-shirt he wore somehow seemed out of place on this bestial man.

Above his head was the label “Immortal (9).” Perhaps that immortality had enabled the recklessness of the attack. He had never put the brakes on the truck, just accelerated full speed.

“Lady Aiko!” Nero charged through the ruined wall of the cafe to arrive at Aiko’s side.

“Hey. Couldn’t you have done something about that?” Yuichi set the two down and pointed at the truck. Nero had been outside, so he should have realized it before Yuichi.

“I weighed what I knew of your capabilities against the demerits of revealing my true form,” he responded.

“And you decided to put it all on me, huh?” Yuichi asked. It seemed Nero wasn’t particularly powerful while in dog form.

“But, you know, you didn’t have to go out of your way to save me. I am immortal, after all...” Monika seemed sulky despite him having saved her.

“That’s what you claim, but I doubt you could survive a hit by something like that unscathed, right?” he asked.

“It’s not like that. Since I exist outside destiny, I’m unaffected by dramatic events like death,” she said. “In this case, the truck would have gone out of its way to miss me, or—”

Before Monika could finish her explanation, Yuichi dragged her towards him.

There was a sound of something breaking on the wall behind them, and a drop of blood trailed down Monika’s cheek.

The giant had thrown the broken side mirror at them. If Yuichi

hadn't drawn her to him, she would have been hit by it directly.

"There was no way it should have hit me, but..." Monika stared dumbfounded, as if she couldn't believe it. "Um, I'm starting to think I might like it if you'd protect me... is that okay?"

She looked up at him with cute, upturned eyes.

"I won't abandon you, but once this is over, I want a full explanation." As he covered for the two girls' escape, Yuichi started forming a plan for what to do next.

*****

It was morning, the first day of the second term.

Yuichi had made it safely through his stormy summer vacation. As he reached his classroom, his companion, the bespectacled Tomomi Hamasaki, leaned in to him.

"What happened next?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" Yuichi looked at Tomomi in surprise. He had assumed that arriving at the classroom meant that the story was over. Aiko, who had walked to school with him, was also looking at her in puzzlement.

"You went to training camp for summer vacation! Then when you got back, this elementary school girl confronted you! Then a guy crashed a truck into the cafe where you were talking! There's gotta be more, right?"

"I told you, didn't I?" he asked. "Stuff happened, summer vacation ended, and it didn't feel like much of a vacation at all."

"Elaborate on the 'stuff happened' part!" she exclaimed.

Tomomi had met up with them right as they entered the school building. Yuichi had been telling her all about his summer vacation on the walk to the classroom, but it was getting more and more troublesome to explain, so he had just glossed over the rest.

"Tomo, this really isn't something we can talk about in the classroom." Aiko gently admonished her, and Tomomi pulled back sulkily.

It certainly wouldn't be a good thing to talk about in the classroom. That was why Yuichi had swiftly brought an end to it there and then. The part with the truck hadn't even gotten them to the last third of the entire summer vacation.

"You'd better come by the restaurant later and explain everything!" Tomomi told him.

"Your restaurant? Are you gonna ask me to support your business again?" Yuichi asked.

Tomomi lived in a Chinese restaurant called Nihao the China. The restaurant's owner, Tomomi's father, also had the label "Nihao the China" floating over his head, and Tomomi acted as a waitress there.

It was an extremely strange place.

The restaurant existed in a dimension that normal people couldn't perceive, which made it a great place to talk about confidential information. But as a result, they apparently didn't do much business.

"You come too, Aiko! Your club is always welcome, also!" Tomomi declared.

They entered the classroom. As usual, it was a chaotic sight. Various labels floated in the air, forming a jumble in the small classroom.

But Yuichi had grown accustomed to the sight, and he didn't really mind it anymore.

He could still see all the bizarre labels, but after a few months' time, he had grown capable of ignoring their contents.

"Hey. How was your summer vacation?" As he arrived at his desk, he was addressed by Shota Saeki, who sat in front of him. Above his head was the label "Ace Striker."

"Just went to the beach for summer training camp," Yuichi said. "You?"

"Soccer, soccer, and more soccer," Shota muttered. He was tall and well-built, and all in all, seemed like your average high school soccer goon.

But Yuichi wasn't letting his guard down. There was always a chance that Shota might start playing interdimensional soccer at some point. He wasn't sure what he would do if that happened, but he had decided he should at least be mentally prepared in case it did.

"Hey, is she looking over here again?" Shota asked, with dread in his voice. "It's freaky."

"Witch" An Katagiri was glaring at Yuichi, and Shota was clearly remembering her introduction on the first day of school.

An, as usual, was clinging to Takuro Oda.

Takuro had been Yuichi's friend since middle school. Originally the label above his head had been "Friend," but now he had become "Witch's Beloved," receiving attention from "Witch."

Yuichi thought that the labels he saw must have something to do with the concept of worldview.

In other words, they displayed the person's role in the worldview they were associated with above their head. A person's role might vary depending on which worldview they were involved with at the time. Thus, Takuro would still be "Friend" in the world where he was associated with Yuichi, but Soul Reader could only display one label, and he didn't know how to swap between them.

Perhaps moved by pity, Takuro had apparently gone out with An a few times over summer vacation. Yuichi was a little worried, but as long as Takuro didn't show interest in other women, he thought, he

should be safe.

"Could we talk for a moment?"

Yuichi tore his eyes from An to look at the blonde girl standing in front of him. "What is it?"

It was Yuri Konishi, "Anthromorph." This was his first time seeing her since their encounter on Kurokami Island during summer vacation. They had been enemies there, which had left Yuichi feeling uncertain about how he would face her when their second term began. But Yuri didn't seem awkward about it at all, and Yuichi was relieved that he was apparently overthinking it.

"Meet me on the roof after class," she said.

Perhaps she wanted to settle her grudge from the island. If so, Yuichi was happy to do it.

"Why was Konishi talking to you?" Shota asked, looking at him with his mouth agape. Before Yuichi could figure out how to explain, the warning bell for homeroom rang.

At the same time, the classroom door opened. Yuichi found it unusual. Usually their homeroom teacher, Hanako Nodayama, was just barely on time, or a little bit late.

The one who entered was a man named Hayashibara, a substitute homeroom teacher. Above his head was the label "Teacher," implying he wasn't caught up in any other, more troublesome worlds. He taught math, and had an easygoing attitude, and he was popular among the students because of it.

His presence caused whispers to run through the classroom. Why would they have a substitute on the first day of the new term?

"Okay, quiet down, everyone," the man said. "I'm sure you're all surprised by the suddenness of this, but Ms. Nodayama isn't feeling well, and she's taking today off."

"That's weird. Miss Hanako's never taken off before, has she?" Shota asked dubiously.

Yuichi couldn't remember her ever taking time off, either.

The substitute teacher led them all to the gym, where the student body was divided into seats by class to look up at the stage. The teachers up there talked business for a while, and then the principal launched into a long-winded speech.

This was Yuichi's first term-opening speech since entering high school, but it seemed no different from the ones he'd had in middle school. After the principal's opening remarks concluded, the vice principal took the podium.

"The teacher for Classroom 1-B, Nodayama, will be taking some time off for poor health. Let me introduce your new substitute teacher in the meantime, Ms. Shikitani." The teacher appeared at the podium in response to the vice principal's call.

Immediately, the gym burst into whispers.

She was a terrifyingly beautiful woman.

Stylish glasses, tall, and with a great figure. Her outfit, too — striped shirt, necktie, and miniskirt — clearly set her apart from the school's usual, more modestly dressed teachers.

Like the rest of the students, Yuichi fixed his eyes on her. But it wasn't because he was entranced by her beauty.

It was because she didn't have a label over her head.

He thought back again to Monika. She hadn't had a label, either. Which meant that this woman was an Outer, too.

"I am Makina Shikitani," the woman said. "I'll be 1-B's homeroom teacher until Ms. Nodayama is back. I look forward to working with you all."

Makina smiled faintly from atop the podium. Her gaze focused straight on Yuichi.

After the opening ceremony ended, Makina led the 1-B students back to their classroom. She gave a simple introduction back at the classroom, and that was the end of homeroom for that day. She departed immediately after.

"Wait!" Just as she was leaving the room, Yuichi flew out after her.

"Oh, you surprised me." Makina turned back, not bothering to hide her surprise. "That's no way to talk to your teacher, is it? It took me a moment to even realize that you were talking to me..."

"...Sorry. Miss Shikitani, could I have a moment of your time?" He had lost a bit of his cool, but they couldn't talk about this out in the hall, so Yuichi decided to act more deferential.

"This certainly isn't what I was expecting," she said. "I didn't think you'd make contact so quickly. Wouldn't most people spend a lot of time weighing their options? You looked like an idiot, sitting there smiling knowingly, you know."

"I don't care about that," he said.

"That's fine. Let's go to the student guidance room." Makina issued the directive, then started walking. Even just walking down the hall, the beautiful woman drew stares from everyone around her. Yuichi felt uneasy walking behind her.

They quickly arrived at the guidance room on the first floor. Makina went inside. Yuichi followed, and shut the door.

An instant later, a chill went up his spine.

Feeling a sudden change in the atmosphere, Yuichi spun to face Makina.

"Oh-ho... despite finding me suspicious, you walked right into my trap. Yet you also noticed the trap the minute it was sprung. How very interesting." Makina sat deep in her chair and looked at Yuichi with

intense interest.

Yuichi tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge. It was as if it had become part of the wall.

"Before you waste a lot of time struggling, let me tell you something," she said. "You are trapped in this room. You can't get out until you win the game. So for now, just come right over here, and we'll have a little talk."

Yuichi considered breaking down the door, but carelessly destroying school property would cause its own kind of trouble. He decided to do as Makina had said, and sat down across from her.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"The fact that you don't know anything about my ability suggests you haven't actually heard about me," she said.

"Of course I don't know your ability," Yuichi replied. "I just assumed you were an Outer."

"True. But when dealing with an Outer, you should always be on your guard," she said. "For instance, I use an ability called 'Sealed Room Game.' It can be used in any closed space. In other words, all you had to do to prevent it was to not close the door."

"I couldn't have known that..." Yuichi responded, sulkily. How was he supposed to predict things like abilities and closed spaces?

"True. But had you collected information about Outers' abilities in advance, you likely would have been able to foresee *something*. Let this be a learning experience."

"But in that case, you could just have shut the door yourself," he retorted.

"I wish it were that easy," she said. "I cannot apply the ability to closed spaces that I myself have created, and while the ability is in use, I must remain within the space."

Yuichi filed that information away, but it wouldn't help him get out of the trap now that he was in it. "You said it was a game, right? So what are the rules?"

"You catch on quickly," she said. "That's good. It's quite simple, really. Some time within the next thirty minutes, I will lie once, and only once. If you see through the lie, you win, and you'll be able to leave the room. You'll have only one chance to guess."

Yuichi felt the atmosphere in the room change. Simply speaking the words had changed something. Words of power, perhaps?

"What guarantee do I have?" he asked. "Even if I saw through the lie, you could just pretend I didn't."

"Seeing as you've only just met me, I doubt you'll be willing to go on trust," she said. "But the rules of 'Sealed Room Game' are absolute, and they apply to me as well. So once you recognize the lie, it will be impossible for me to pretend that you haven't. I can change, add, or

delete rules, but when I do, I must tell you. And of course, I wouldn't do anything that would break the game. I'm only doing this because I like games, you see. To violate that spirit would miss the point entirely."

"And if I win, I can leave?" he asked.

"More precisely, there are three conditions under which my power will be nullified. The first is if you meet the victory conditions for the game. The second is if I leave this room. The third is if I lose consciousness — via death, fainting, sleep, etc. Of course, you know the third would be difficult to achieve, don't you? It's extremely hard for outside forces to affect Outers. On top of that, I have an ability called 'Inviolable Domain.' It protects the people, locations, and items necessary for the game's completion from unmerited violence. In other words, you cannot simply lash out and knock me unconscious." Makina triumphantly crossed her legs and her arms, emphasizing her chest. She looked at Yuichi with inviting eyes and smiled lasciviously.

"What happens if I lose?"

“Hmm. Unfazed by the sexy teacher act, are you?” she asked. “You’re not like most high school students. Why not act a little more flustered? Come on, you can see up my skirt. Aren’t you interested in my cleavage?”

“I don’t care about that stuff,” he said. “Answer my question.”

“The rules are as I said before,” she told him. “If you win, you can leave. That means that if you lose, you can’t leave, and you’ll remain trapped here until I grow tired of it. If you want to get out quickly, you’d better work for it. Now, the game has already begun. Feel free to ask questions that will see through my lie. I will lie once, and only once. A skillful interrogation might earn you useful information.”

“What happened to Ms. Nodayama?” Yuichi demanded. He was angry. He wasn’t especially close to his teacher, but he still liked Hanako and her irresponsible, do-whatever attitude.

Makina looked dismissive. “You make it sound like I did something to her. But it’s just as they told you: she’s not feeling well.”

“Yeah, right! You’re telling me she just happened to get sick, and you just happened to arrive?” Annoyed by Makina’s level tone, Yuichi started raising his voice.

“To claim it was total coincidence would be a lie,” she said. “I wanted to be a teacher at this school, so I got my teacher’s license. But I needed an opening, as well, which meant that someone would need to take time off. There was no *particular* reason why I chose Ms. Nodayama... if I’d known you would get this angry, maybe I should have picked a different teacher?”

“If you made her sick, cure her right now.” Yuichi’s voice was ice cold. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been this angry.

“But I told you before,” she said. “I have only two abilities: ‘Sealed Room Game’ and ‘Inviolable Domain.’ I don’t have the power to make someone sick, or to cure them.”

“What did you do?” he demanded.

“Good question.” She smiled. “First, I’ll explain what happened to Ms. Nodayama. To put it in so many words, she was dumped by her childhood friend of twenty years. Surprised? Despite how she looks, she was quite the earnest young maiden in love. But their engagement was broken off just before the wedding. It was traumatizing. She literally cannot eat. But her condition isn’t that bad. Even if she won’t eat, the hospital will keep her nourished, and the pain of the heartbreak will ease in time.”

If that was true, Yuichi felt a bit relieved. He didn’t know about the pain of heartbreak, but at least it wasn’t something permanent.

“Of course, I’m the one who stole her childhood friend,” Makina added.

Yuichi rose to his feet.

"Now, don't get angry," she reproved him. "I'm free to love whomever I wish, aren't I? What gives you the right to complain about that?"

Yuichi grudgingly sat back down. He could sense something malicious in her roundabout way of speaking, but if it was just an affair, it was hard to argue about it.

Once he had calmed down, Makina started speaking again. "But I must say, Yuichi Sakaki... you aren't much like I'd heard. You're sticking your neck in quite aggressively. When I came to this school, Ende... she's a bit like our manager, more or less... told me to avoid you, if possible."

"What do you mean, 'not what you heard'?" Yuichi asked.

"I was told you were the... you know, 'average looks and personality yet still gets all the girls,' 'remains indecisive despite women throwing themselves at him, but gives in just enough so that none of them hate him,' 'suffers from intermittent deafness to miss crucial lines spoken by others,' 'participates in a club as an excuse to hang out with his friends,' 'refrains from interfering in an incident until it's just in the nick of time/sometimes a bit too late,' 'constantly says "yare yare"' type."

"What, a protagonist?!" he snapped. Her teasing tone was successfully needling him.

"Go on, ask me anything," she said confidently. "If you don't, I'll go into detail about how I ensnared Ms. Nodayama's fiancé."

"I don't want to hear about that crap," he said. "What did you come to the school for?"

"That's a secret," Makina quipped.

"You said I could ask anything."

"I never said I had to answer."

"You freaking—"

"Well, if I must say something about it, I'd say it's your fault."

"Huh?" The unexpected answer gave Yuichi pause. He and Makina had only just met. How could there possibly be a connection between them?

"Do you remember the attack on your life during the first half of summer vacation?" Makina asked.

"You'll have to be more specific..." Yuichi tried thinking back to all the times he'd been attacked during summer vacation, but none of them stood out as remarkable.

Makina stared at him in shock. "How many times have you been attacked?"

"It's not my fault!" he cried.

"The truck that crashed into the cafe," she clarified. "Do you

remember that?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Are you the one who arranged that?"

"Yes. He was one of my more powerful pawns, and now he's ruined, thanks to you. I've been forced to abandon my Plan A. Getting a job at this school is part of the groundwork for Plan B."

"I guess you're not gonna tell me what your plan is?" he asked.

"No, so don't bother asking about it again. Ask me something else. If you ask something I want to answer, I'll be more than happy to oblige!" Makina added, as if to placate him.

"I heard you guys were ageless and immortal. Is that true?" Yuichi asked. He had been told that Outers, freed from the destiny that all things must die, were effectively undying.

"Close, but not quite," she said. "It's not impossible for us to die. What it comes down to is that if there's *any* chance for us to stay alive, we *always* will. In situations where there's no choice but to die, we die, and methods have been formulated to drive us into such situations. Yes, it might be more accurate to say that Outers are extremely lucky."

"You think you can explain non-aging with luck?" he asked skeptically.

"The exact mechanism behind aging hasn't actually been discovered, so I can't say for certain. But if living beings are programmed to age, then perhaps a flaw in that program could develop, due to luck. Under the programming theory, the telomeres at the end of chromosomes are viewed as counters for how many times the cells divide. So perhaps they just happen to not shorten."

"Are you sure you want to tell me all of this?" he asked. What she was saying meant it wasn't impossible for him to kill her. This could be useful information in dealing with Outers.

"It would be easy enough to find out with a little investigation," she said nonchalantly. "I see no reason to hide it."

Yuichi listened cautiously to Makina's words. He was treating this as a battle, paying close attention to her every gesture and action. In battle, Yuichi could easily identify a feint. Her gaze, her tone, her smell, her pigment, her heart rate, her muscle tension — he could combine them all in making his judgment. So far, she hadn't lied.

"I intend to remain a teacher here for a while," she went on. "If you have any questions about that, let's clear them up right away to resolve any potential awkwardness between us."

"Why do you want to be a teacher here?" he asked. "I heard that Outers altered stories from the outside." Of course, he knew that "from the outside" didn't refer to some other plane of existence, just that Outers liked to manipulate destiny from on high, like gods. But at the moment, Makina was trying to get directly involved with Seishin

High School.

"It's up to the individual," she said. "I like to watch things unfold from a front-row seat, in real time. There's another who simply likes to read about things in a book after they're over. We all have different tastes."

"Don't you want to kill me because I know about you?" he asked. Yuichi, knowing as he did about the existence of Outers, could pose a threat to Makina.

"Hey, now," she said. "Just who do you think I am? Who would do something like that, after coming all the way here to be your teacher?"

"The worst kind of garbage person, which is what I heard you are," he retorted.

"Hmm. I won't deny that... but do you think I'm a villain? That there's nothing I won't do to achieve my goals?"

"Am I wrong?"

"It's true that I'll do anything to achieve my goals, but my goal isn't what you're thinking," she said. "We're not trying to conquer the world, exterminate humanity, or force our views on anybody. Generally speaking, we're just killing time. There's no particular meaning behind anything we do, we're just trying to have fun. That's why we obsess so much over procedure. It would be easy to kill you right now, but I'm not omnipotent. Your corpse would be left behind as evidence, and I'd have to deal with getting rid of it. It would throw my planning off track, and defeat all the hard work I've put in to make sure I came to this school."

"So what?" he asked. "I doubt you have anything good planned for the school."

"I won't deny that that's the case," she said carelessly. "But it has nothing to do with you. There are many things you watch passively, without interference, despite being able to perceive them with Soul Reader. Think of me as the same way."

Soul Reader. The term gave Yuichi pause. Only a few people knew about that; Makina, who had only just met him, shouldn't be one of them.

"I know, more or less, what you've been doing," she said. "It's there in all the books. When I decided to come to this school, I made it my business to read them."

He wondered what she meant by "it's there in all the books."

"There's an Outer who has that ability," she added.

"What the heck are you—"

"If you were willing to befriend 'Serial Killer,' you can look the other way for me, can't you?" she asked.

"Huh?" The words hit him like a physical blow. He never would

have thought she'd know about Natsuki, too.

"...She's... not killing people right now." It was hard to argue with her, but Yuichi managed to strain those words out.

"You really think that quibbling constitutes an argument?" she asked. "Ah, but enough about 'Serial Killer.' Let's not talk about the past. What about 'Adult Datesim Protagonist,' then? He's a nasty piece of work. He likes to steal other people's girlfriends, even raping them if it's necessary. You're going to let that slide? And that 'Witch' is really something, too. She'll do anything to get what she wants. She's got her venomous fangs in quite a few people, as well."

Makina seemed to know more about these people than the mere labels Soul Reader provided him.

"I couldn't possibly know about all of that!" Yuichi shouted.

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying," she said calmly. "If I don't tell you what I plan to do, there's no need for you to do anything about it. Think of it as something happening worlds away."

Yuichi had always played the nihilist, telling himself that one person couldn't save the entire world. At the same time, he couldn't just accept what she was saying, going along with the idea that it was none of his business. He was starting to think that maybe his philosophy was wrong.

"Now, Yuichi Sakaki," she said. "Have you forgotten that we're playing a game? I've already told you one lie. Which is it? If you're not sure, I'll give you a hint—"

"'I've already told you one lie.' That's the lie," Yuichi answered immediately.

"...Wait a minute. I said 'already.' You don't think the lie happened during our conversation?"

"The thirty minutes since you explained the rules aren't up yet," he said. "You're still on the clock."

"Most people would logically assume the answer was part of the conversation."

"Yeah, so?" he asked. "My instincts tell me you hadn't told a single lie before then."

Part of that came from his continuous observation of her, but it was more a gut feeling on his part.

"It's a boring way to end it... but ah, well. You win." Makina waved him away, seeming genuinely annoyed.

"You're saying I can go?" he asked.

"That's right. I doubt that our conversation has resolved all your questions, but I'd appreciate it if you would not stick your nose in where it isn't wanted. I intend to be a proper teacher, so I'd appreciate it if you'd treat me that way."

"...Understood, Miss Shikitani." Further conversation was

pointless. Yuichi stood up and headed for the door.

"Oh, one more thing."

He had just opened the door when Makina called him back.

"Do you know why Ms. Nodayama's dye job is so poorly done?" she asked.

Yuichi turned back around. Makina gave him a thin smile..

"Because... she can't be bothered, right?" he asked. Hanako's hair was brown overall, but black at the roots. Quite a bit of time must have passed since she'd first dyed it.

"If she didn't want to be bothered with it, why would she dye it in the first place?" Makina asked.

Yuichi had wondered the same thing at first, but eventually, he had decided she must have done it on a whim of some kind, and he hadn't given it any further thought.

"Here's what I think," Makina said. "They say it's not good to dye your hair while you're pregnant. There's an old wives tale that the dye soaks in through the skin and harms the growing fetus. It's not true, of course, but you can't stop people from believing in it. It's a natural motherly instinct to want to eliminate anything that might cause even the slightest harm to the baby."

Yuichi couldn't figure out what she was getting at.

"Of course, this is mere supposition," she said. "I have no evidence to suggest that Ms. Nodayama was pregnant. But if I were to follow my supposition to its natural conclusion, the father is likely her childhood friend. Then, with their marriage approaching, he suddenly canceled the engagement and ran off with another woman. Can you imagine the heartbreak that would cause? Such a traumatic amount of stress, enough to make her stop eating... what effect might that have on the pregnancy? My thoughts go first to the restriction of blood flow. Stress causes the capillaries to dilate, which would prevent the flow of nutrition to the fetus. It also increases prolactin, which reduces the functioning of the ovaries and reduces the progestogen hormone required to maintain the pregnancy, too. In such a situation, it wouldn't be a surprise if the fetus were affected, would it?"

"You—!" Yuichi was enraged. If what Makina was intimating was true, it was unforgivable.

"And then they would take measures to stop it, wouldn't they?" she asked. "Don't be so annoyed. I'm just teasing you a bit. I'm frustrated at how easily I lost the game."

"Didn't you say you didn't want me to get involved?!" he snapped. If she wanted to reach a truce with him, there was no reason for her to have said all that.

"That's true," she said. "I suppose I just wanted to see the look on your face."

“What?”

“There are things I can endure for the sake of my goal, but I will sometimes act just to satisfy immediate curiosity, despite it being of no rational benefit to me,” she explained. “Now, this time, our conversation really is over. You can be off for now.”

Yuichi glared at Makina, then jerked opened the door and flew out of the student guidance room. But just as he was about to run off, he detected somebody else nearby.

“Yu, what’s wrong? You’re looking like you feel like you did when you were poor!” Mutsuko cried.

“I was never poor!” Yuichi snapped back.

Mutsuko and Aiko were right outside of the door, waiting.

Yuichi closed the door to the guidance room. He had a nagging feeling that he shouldn’t let Mutsuko and Makina meet.

“What are you doing here anyway, Sis?” he asked. She had said they were having a club meeting that day, so Yuichi would have expected her to be in the club room already.

“I-I just heard you’d been taken to a student guidance room, okay?” she cried. “I was just worried you’d done something awful, that’s all!”

“You’re just saying that to sound tsundere,” he said flatly. “Don’t try new things. It doesn’t suit you.”

“So? Are you really okay?” Mutsuko leaned in, peering into his face with genuine concern. His expression must have really been something.

“Yeah, really, I’m fine. The minute I saw you, everything went stale again.”

“What the heck?!” Her concern shifted immediately into huffing anger.

“Sakaki, what on earth happened?” Aiko looked worried, too. She must not have known what to make of him bolting out of a door like that.

“I’ll explain later,” he said. “Setting that aside, do you know if Ms. Nodayama’s in the hospital?”

“Hmm, I dunno. I could ask my dad, if you want...” Aiko pulled out her cell phone and called.

Hanako had been admitted to Noro General Hospital, so they could find out her condition immediately.

As it turned out, she had been admitted for malnutrition, but she wasn’t pregnant.

Chapter 2: No One Cared About the Absent Club Members

In the survival club room on the second floor of the old school building, Yuichi sulkily rested his chin in his hands. He wasn't in the mood for club, but he had been literally dragged there by Mutsuko.

"Okay! Time to get started on our second term!" Mutsuko declared proudly while standing in her usual spot in front of the whiteboard.

"I've been thinking... What's with this club? What does any of this have to do with survival?" Yuichi asked with a barbed tone. His conversation with Makina was still gnawing at him.

"Sakaki, you're just asking that now?!" Aiko, sitting beside him, stared at him in shock.

"Personally, I don't really care what the club does," another club member said coolly.

"Then why did you join it?!" Yuichi exclaimed.

That statement, even more blunt than Yuichi's, had come from Natsuki Takeuchi, who was sitting across the table from them.

The serial killer, "Love Interest II." A beautiful girl with short hair and cold eyes. They'd bonded a bit during summer training camp, but he still didn't have any idea what she was thinking, most of the time. He had a hard time knowing how to interact with her, too.

"Your sister invited me," Natsuki said lightly. "And you were here. Those are my reasons, more or less."

"The survival club is the survival club," Mutsuko declared. "Natural disasters, post-apocalyptic futures, alien invasions. We're learning how to defend against all of that stuff!"

"Yeah, I know that," Yuichi said. "But what do we actually *do*?"

They had talked about tips for what you would do if you ended up in an isekai, and about the psychology of killing people. But Yuichi couldn't help but feel that that stuff didn't have much to do with survival.

"You've got a bee in your bonnet today, huh, Yu? Are you reaching that rebellious age, or something?" Mutsuko asked. "Hey, Orihara! We're a real survival club, aren't we?"

"Ah?" the other girl responded absent-mindedly to Mutsuko's question.

She was Kanako Orihara, the club's vice president. She was sitting

beside Natsuki, diagonally across from Yuichi. She was a striking girl with wavy, chestnut hair, and as mild a personality as her appearance implied. She seemed confused by Mutsuko's question, as if her mind had been somewhere else.

Above her head was the label "Isekai Writer." Previously it had been "Isekai Fanatic," but the label was so similar that Yuichi didn't think about it too deeply.

"I was saying, we're a real survival club, right?" Mutsuko asked.

"...That's right. But Hisaka doesn't come at all anymore. Maybe there really is a problem..." Kanako said, after thinking back carefully.

"Who is Hisaka?" Aiko looked up in surprise at the mention of the name.

"One of the club's members!" Mutsuko declared. "Stopped coming right after we started up, though. I guess they thought it was a survival *game* club? Came in the full equipment and seemed really hyped up about it, too!"

"That's a reasonable mistake to make, isn't it?" Yuichi had a feeling that more people knew about survival games than about survival itself.

"Maybe they got mad 'cause I said, 'Shooting airsoft guns isn't useful in survival!' But don't worry! I've been thinking about things a little more flexibly of late! Rather than just extreme situations, I've been thinking, maybe we should just think about how to deal with guns, or something. If people know they get to handle real guns, I'm sure they'll come!"

"Where are we going to get guns?" Yuichi asked flatly.

"My house." Natsuki raised her hand, looking quite triumphant about it.

"Don't look smug! That's a crime!" Yuichi exclaimed. He remembered how Natsuki had shot at him the first time they'd fought.

"No problem! Both guns and bullets are easy to make!" Mutsuko announced, also failing to understand that they were discussing a felony.

"That's right, I heard you could make them with 3D printing." Yuichi remembered seeing that on the news.

"Those aren't any good," Mutsuko said dismissively. "They fall apart after just a few shots, and they're not dependable at all! It's easy to make real guns with stuff we've got around the house!"

"What exactly do we have around our house?" Yuichi asked, startled. He couldn't remember seeing or hearing about anything like that. "Oh, yeah, and there are two missing club members, right? One is Hisaka. Who's the other?"

Yuichi hadn't thought about it much before, but since they'd brought the subject up, he decided he might as well ask.

“Iyn Ryuoh,” Mutsuko said. “What a piece of work! Wore mismatched contact lenses, eyepatches, arm bandages, and dressed all in black with a cape. Is that what they call ‘middle school syndrome’? Kept repeating all these endless original ‘magic’ chants...” Mutsuko groaned.

“That member probably joined the club because they thought they’d found a kindred spirit!” Yuichi cried. “You should have hung out! The poor thing...”

Admittedly, that wasn’t the sort of “middle school syndrome” that Mutsuko had much interest in. She did like to wear ostentatiously “cool” clothing, but practicality was the most important thing to her.

“No way! If the magic was real, then maybe...” Mutsuko murmured, apparently unwilling to be moved on the subject.

As they chatted back and forth, they heard a knock on the door. Yuichi stood up and went to answer it. They rarely got visitors there, but for some reason, everyone had seemed to be in silent agreement that Yuichi should be the one to get the door.

“Um, is Ms. Orihara here?!” There were two girls at the door, students of their school. They were calling her “Ms.”, and carrying books, so it was immediately obvious to Yuichi what they were there for.

“Orihara, looks like you’ve got some fans,” Yuichi said.

“Oh? What is it?” Kanako walked up to the door as Yuichi went back to his seat.

The girls held out their books, and Kanako politely began signing.

Kanako had very recently had her debut as a student author. She had been publishing chapters of a story on the internet, which had been found by an editor and published.

Her novel, *My Demon Lord Is Too Cute to Kill and Now the World is in Danger!*, had gone on sale at the end of August. She had gotten permission from the school to do it, and wasn’t especially trying to hide it. As a result, many people at school had learned of Kanako’s literary debut.

I guess she became “Isekai Writer” because she got published... Yuichi mused. She was a proper author now, with her book being published and sold in stores. Maybe that had had an influence on her label.

“It’s a little embarrassing, signing autographs...” Kanako murmured.

“Thank you so much!” the girls cried.

The two girls ran off, and Kanako returned bashfully to her seat.

“Is it getting good reviews?” Yuichi asked offhandedly, then immediately regretted it. It might be a rude question to ask the author herself.

“It seems the people at school are reading it... um, but people

aren't talking about it very much online..." she murmured.

"I was thinking of getting around to reading it," Yuichi said, trying to change the subject as he kicked himself internally.

"You don't have to, if you don't want to," Kanako responded apologetically.

"No, I'll read it."

Mutsuko and Aiko had been reading it, and they'd been throwing out a lot of words during club, like "Twelve Hell Kings" and "Colossus." He'd found it slightly intriguing, and had wanted to read it for a while, but hadn't yet found the chance.

"Well, time to get down to business! Today's theme is this!" Mutsuko wrote "Surviving in the Isekai Glowsphere!" on the whiteboard.

"More isekai stuff, huh?" Yuichi sighed. "And what the hell is a Glowsphere?"

"What else? It's the alternate world from Orihara's novel, *My Demon Lord Is Too Cute to Kill and Now the World is in Danger!*"

"Did you come up with that just now, because her fans dropped in?" he asked. It was a bit simplistic, but that was Mutsuko for you.

"What's wrong with that?" she demanded. "We have a high school light novel author, the great Ms. Orihara, here with us right now! We should take advantage of a chance to talk to the creator directly! Go ahead, Ms. Orihara! Come on down!"

Mutsuko got around behind Kanako and pulled her upright, then dragged her up to the whiteboard. While Kanako stood there like a deer in headlights, Mutsuko took Kanako's former seat.

"Isn't her novel fiction? What's the point of coming up with survival strategies for that?" Natsuki pointed out coldly.

Yuichi sort of knew what she was getting at. It was one thing to talk about isekais in the abstract, but discussing survival in a known fictional world felt like a farce.

"Well, I believe that Glowsphere exists," Kanako said, timidly but firmly.

"Uh, is it okay to think about it like that?" Yuichi asked, feeling a little concerned about Kanako. Or was that what it was felt like, when you were a writer?

"I saw it when I was a child, and I still dream about it," she explained. "So it's not completely fictional..."

"A dream, huh? Then we'll proceed from the idea that you saw it in a dream! So, what's your story about, Orihara?" Yuichi asked, forcefully dragging the conversation forward.

"Um, put simply, the male hero falls in love with the female Demon Lord, and he's forced to choose between her and the world. The protagonist is the Hero of Scales, Astoria Kruger, and the Demon

Lord is Lasagna von Jusphoria. The fundamental question of the story is whether they'll get together or not."

"That much I could more or less make out from the title," he said. "So, how is the world in danger?"

"Sakaki! You can't ask that!" Aiko exclaimed.

"Why not? It's the natural question to ask, isn't it?" he asked.

Aiko seemed strangely angry about the question he had asked offhandedly.

"Sorry, but that's still a secret," Kanako said. "What matters is that at the end of the story, it has to be one or the other. Will he kill the Demon Lord and save the world, or destroy the world to save the Demon Lord? There can be no ending where he saves the world *and* lives in it with her."

"That's heavier than I was expecting," he mused. The title had made it sound like a comedy.

"But let's leave the plot stuff aside!" Mutsuko declared. "The question is, what would you do if you were sent to that world? First, you'd have to pick a faction!"

"Then I'll explain in brief about that," Kanako said. "Glowsphere contains two main forces that are waging war. One is the faction of the Demon Lord described in the title. The other is the Hero Army. Humans come from several different countries, but the Hero Army is a united force, so it's okay to think of the humans as a single faction. The people have crossed borders to join forces against the Demon Lord's threat."

Yuichi felt relieved that there were only two factions to remember. If there were warring human groups on top of everything, there would be no way he'd be able to keep it straight.

"The Demon Lord is invading human territory," Kanako went on. "The Demon Lord Army is very powerful, too powerful for normal people to stand against. Within it are the Demon Lord's lieutenants, the Twelve Hell Kings. Her army is a three-tiered system, with the Demon Lord standing at the head, and below her the Twelve Hell Kings, who lead an army of fiends. The Demon Lord's true power is still unknown, and the fiends are foot soldiers, so the Twelve Hell Kings are the foundation of the Demon Lord Army.

"The Twelve Hell Kings have sworn fealty to the Demon Lord, but they're far from a monolith; they all have different ideas about things. Broadly speaking, there are three factions among them. The absolute obedience faction is Chance Meeting Meredith, Battle Dust Sevrine, and Decisive Judgment Glenda. The neutral faction is Blue Sky Rochefort, Brutal Gertrude, and Lamenting Alexandra. The idealist faction is Raging Geshtenks, Mediator Christophes, and Southern Lights Sylvester. The absolute obedience faction acts in complete

accordance with what the Demon Lord says. The neutral faction acts in the Demon Lord's best interest and sometimes offers counsel. The idealist faction wants Lasagna to be held to a higher standard as Demon Lord."

A lengthy explanation. Kanako had always been long-winded, but Yuichi couldn't understand even half of it this time.

"Excuse me, you said there were twelve Hell Kings. That was only nine," Natsuki pointed out, raising her hand.

"I can't believe you picked that out..." Yuichi was impressed. He'd been so lost, he hadn't even tried counting names.

"I'm sorry, but the last three are connected to the Demon Lord's secret, so I can't tell you who they are just yet," Kanako explained. "Next, the Hero Army. Heroes are people who one day suddenly acquired a supernatural power. When you awaken as a hero, a symbol appears on the back of your hand. That symbol reveals your power. For instance, the protagonist, Astoria, has the scales mark. His power lets him weigh two options and identify which one is better. Other examples include the flower mark, which indicates control of plants; the mountain mark, which lets you makes yourself heavier; the cat mark, which gives you great agility; and so on.

"The Hero Army are humanity's trump card against the Demon Lord Army, but the protagonist Astoria is considered to be the weakest and most cowardly hero in the whole army. Once every one hundred days, the Demon Lord Army rests, leaving only the bare minimum of forces behind. The heroes want to use this as an opportunity to attack and take out one of the Twelve Hell Kings, or possibly the Demon Lord herself. This is all prelude to the story. Now, I'll list the main heroes of the hero army. First, the Flower Circle Hero, Flammy..."

She went on and on talking about the heroes from her story, and Yuichi barely remembered any of it.

Club came to an end while they were still in the morning hours, and Yuichi headed to the roof.

"You are late!" a voice exclaimed.

The minute he got there, he found Yuri was waiting for him. Her pose was imperious, her complicated hairstyle blowing in the wind. Her hands were on her hips, and she was staring straight at Yuichi.

"Sorry, but 'after class' was pretty vague, time-wise," he said. He had remembered the promise, but Makina's little game, and Mutsuko's dragging him to the club meeting against his will, had delayed him.

"If I tell you to come, of course, I mean immediately!" She had all the haughtiness one would expect from a born heiress.

"So, what did you want?" he asked. "To pick up where we left off?"

Yuri had attacked Yuichi during their summer camp, but Mutsuko

had interrupted them, and she had run off.

"First things first," she said. "Who is that?"

"Ahaha. Hello there..." Aiko, who had come along, answered awkwardly.

"I am *aware* of who you are, Noro! I meant the other one! The one clinging to Yuichi Sakaki!"

"You're using my full name?" Yuichi asked. His reaction had been to the least noteworthy part of what she'd said, but he understood why Yuri was so surprised. It was because Kanako was clinging to Yuichi's arm, pressing her substantial breasts against it. "This is Kanako Orihara. She's in my club. She had a book published recently. Maybe you've heard of it?"

"I have heard rumors of it. So?" Yuri asked, urging him to continue. Apparently, the name was not what she'd wanted to hear.

"I said I was going to the roof, and she asked if I would take her with me," he said. "But she's afraid of heights, apparently, so..."

She hadn't said why she'd wanted to come to the roof despite being afraid of heights. As a result, Yuichi was just as baffled as Yuri.

"...This is ridiculous!" In an instant, Yuri unleashed a torrent of pent-up emotion. "Yuichi Sakaki! When I called you here, it should have been clear that I intended to ask you out! Yet you bring a woman along! And one who is ostentatiously hanging off of you, at that! What exactly are you trying to tell me?!"

"How was I supposed to know you wanted to ask me out?!" he shouted.

"If she's afraid of heights, she could cling to Noro! Why must she cling to you, Yuichi Sakaki?!" Yuri exclaimed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't, um, mean to get in the way... but it has to be Sakaki the Younger, or I might be in trouble if I fall..." Kanako said hesitantly in response to Yuri's outpouring of rage.

"You can't fall; there's a fence! And you're acting as if he could even do something to help you if you did!" Yuri cried.

"Oh, well... I think maybe he could," Aiko interrupted, having had some experience with that herself.

"This is none of your business, so would you kindly shut your mouth?!" Yuri snapped.

"Um, right." Yuri's glare forced Aiko back into dejected silence.

"Now, what is wrong with you? If you're so afraid you can barely stand upright, you just shouldn't be here!" Yuri continued, addressing Kanako again.

Kanako's knees had been knocking the entire time they had been on the roof. Yuichi hadn't realized she would be this frightened, but now that they were there, it was hard to ask her to lay off.

"Well... Well, fine. To complain about the situation would be

beneath my dignity," Yuri eventually said, breathlessly, perhaps realizing she wasn't getting anywhere.

"I feel like you've had plenty of complaints already, but okay. Seriously, what do you want?" Yuichi asked.

She had mentioned something about asking him out, but just to be safe, he'd decided to make sure.

"I want you to date me!" she screamed.

"Sorry, I can't."

It might have seemed like an overly flip response, but Yuichi had actually given it quite a bit of consideration in that split-second. Maybe the polite thing to do would have been to offer a more roundabout refusal, or to make more of a show of thinking about it. But it seemed to him that it would be more rude to try to buy time, or add more words for their own sake, when the answer was so obvious. Thus, he came right out with it.

"Why not?" she asked. If it had been an earnest confession of her feelings, she might have been hurt. But Yuri was just being stubborn.

"I hardly know you, and I don't want to accept an offer just because you asked," he said. "What about you, anyway? You barely know me, too."

"Wh-What else can I do? I have my anthromorph instincts! After the display that you showed me..."

"Display? Did she... see you naked?!" Aiko gasped.

"No! And how dare you propose something so outrageous?!" Yuri shouted.

She'd been referring to him killing The Head of All. To an anthromorph, that meant he was now the strongest among them; the leader of the pack. Their instincts would be to follow the leader. In other words, to anthromorphs, Yuichi was now on par with The Head.

"Hang on. So those anthromorph women were, um..." Aiko asked haltingly, as if she had just come upon an upsetting realization.

"Yes. All the female anthromorphs there would have been in Yuichi Sakaki's thrall," Yuri said. "Of course, I believe most of them died in the disaster, but... anyway! You don't particularly dislike me, then? If you don't really know me, then you cannot dislike me! Very well. You shall get to know me henceforth! And at such time as you do, I will ask you out again!"

"You're awfully determined... honestly, after everything you did, it's more surprising that you think I don't hate you..." Yuichi said. She had seemed to be plotting a lot of awful things. Still, Yuichi was willing to put that behind him.

"Hey, should we really be talking about the anthromorph stuff? Orihara's right here," Aiko said, approaching and speaking in a low voice.

“What’s the big deal?” Yuichi said. “She always zones out when we talk about that stuff, and—”

Crash!

Yuichi was interrupted by a sudden loud noise that rang out over the roof.

He turned towards the source of the sound, and Yuri turned to look, as well.

There was Western-style armor on the ground. It was dull, without luster, and squashed completely flat. If there was a person inside, they must have been badly deformed by the fall.

“Huh?” Yuichi and Aiko both asked in surprise, while Yuri and Kanako just stared dumbly at it.

It was so sudden, their brains couldn’t quite process what had happened, at first.

It took them some time just to reason out that — judging from the sound and the state it was in — it must have come from the sky, and quite high up in it, at that.

Yuichi looked up. The sky was blue and clear, without a single cloud. He couldn’t see any sign of where it might have come from.

“17th century heavy cavalry plate mail...” Kanako murmured. “The development of firearms would begin rendering armor obsolete, causing them to make it lighter and lighter. This was the last period during which heavy armor was used. Lancer cavalry was getting phased out, too, so there’s no lance rest.”

“Orihara?” Yuichi asked, concerned.

Kanako was looking straight at the armor as she explained it. She was usually the type to try to escape from reality, but this time, she seemed surprisingly composed.

“Yuichi Sakaki! What is the meaning of this? Is it your doing? Is it some kind of game you’re playing in order to give me the brush-off?” Yuri shouted.

“Why would I go to all this trouble?!” he exclaimed.

“Is... Is there someone... inside?” Aiko asked, fearfully.

“No, I don’t think so,” Yuichi said. “If there were, we would see blood.”

Just as they were vacillating over the idea of getting closer to check, Aiko and Kanako turned their eyes silently towards the sky above.

“Laputa?” Aiko breathed in shock.

“No, what fell was armor, not a girl...” Yuichi said.

“Huh?” Aiko looked at Yuichi, confused.

Yuichi looked up at the sky again. There was definitely nothing there.

“There is something floating there, though...” Aiko, though,

seemed to see something in the sky.

"No, I don't see anything... Konishi, do you see anything in the sky?" Yuichi asked.

"Nothing in particular." Yuri also began craning her neck to look up, but it appeared she didn't see anything.

"What is it?" Yuichi couldn't see anything, either, but that was no reason for him not to believe Aiko. After all, there were strange things out there that only Yuichi could see; he wouldn't be surprised if there were things visible to others that were not visible to him.

"Straight above... It looks like an upside-down castle. I couldn't say how big. There's something like... a dragon? Flying around it..." Aiko spoke haltingly, as if she didn't quite believe what she was saying herself.

"Zalegrande Castle..." Kanako looked up at the sky and whispered, as if in a trance.

"If we're not being attacked, and there's just something weird going on, then I'm not entirely sure how to deal with it..." Yuichi said while looking at the crumpled armor. The armor made no show of attacking; there was no sign of anything alive inside of it. There didn't seem to be any parts below the knee, and there were lots of gaps in it, so if someone had been wearing it, that would have been immediately obvious.

"I sure hope we're not being attacked..." Aiko murmured, dumbfounded, from his side.

Yuri strode up next to them, wearing her anger openly. "I have never been treated in such a fashion! For my once-in-a-lifetime love confession to be defused in such a ridiculous manner... it's extremely upsetting!"

"Orihara... do you know something about this?" She had been murmuring something about it before, so Yuichi decided to ask.

"Ah?" Kanako, who had been clinging to him ever since they got to the roof, now fixed her eyes on him. "Well, let me see... this model was from the age where armor-makers were making their last gasps against the progress of firearms. It was a fruitless task, but they made the armor thicker and even tempered it to try to make it resistant to bullets. The total weight is over 30 kg, and they generally wore it on horseback—"

Her stock of knowledge didn't seem like it would be exhausted for a while, and Yuichi was about to cut her off, when something else came falling.

This time, it happened right before Yuichi's eyes. It had definitely fallen from the sky.

It looked like another part of the armor — a silver plate that struck the roof hard, bounced, and landed next to the armor already

there.

He looked up and saw a few other pieces falling. They appeared to have come from much higher up, so it was hard to know when exactly they had appeared. The next thing he knew, they were there, and that was that.

Planks and clumps of metal of different shapes and sizes bounced off the roof and gathered near the original suit of armor.

“What is it?” he asked Kanako, who seemed like she might know about this, too.

“It’s horse armor,” she said. “In the 16th century, they began experimenting with using steel plates to protect horses, too. But it turned out that having to carry armor, as well as a fully-armored knight, was too much for any less than the sturdiest horses to handle. It also slowed them down, which made it hard to use it effectively.”

“...I thought I’d try and ask, but that’s not very useful in the current situation...” Yuichi commented. Metal plates were falling from the sky. Knowing that they were horse armor wasn’t really helping.

Yuichi waited a little bit, but saw no sign of anything else falling.

“What do you think we should do?” Aiko asked, completely at a loss. “You think we can just leave it? I mean, it can’t have anything to do with us, right?”

“Yeah, I guess it’s none of our business, huh?” Yuichi said.

A mysterious incident had taken place right before their eyes, so it felt like maybe they should do something. But it probably was none of Yuichi’s business right now.

“I am not amused, and I’m going home right now!” Yuri declared. “Yuichi Sakaki! I’ll visit you another time, so be ready when I do!”

Yuri left the roof ahead of the others. Yuichi really did feel like he was being challenged to a duel.

“We should go, too. We can get something to eat on the way,” Yuichi said. He’d suddenly remembered he hadn’t had lunch yet.

It was late at night. Yuichi was in Mutsuko’s room, conferring with her about what had happened earlier that day.

There was a reason he always had these discussions with her late at night: Mutsuko was always busy with something. She often left her door open, but even if she was in her room, if she was concentrating on something, it was forbidden to interrupt her. When she was getting ready for bed was the main time she usually seemed to be free.

The middle of the night was also most convenient for Yuichi, who tended to spend his free time training when there wasn’t something else going on.

Tonight, as usual, Mutsuko was sitting across the low table from Yuichi. She was dressed in a monk’s work outfit. And for some reason,

this time, Yoriko was kneeling next to him, dressed in a negligee.

"The fact that you two are always skulking around here in the middle of the night is very suspicious!" Yoriko complained.

"Yori, don't you have school tomorrow?" he asked. "You should get to bed."

"You both have school, too!" she protested.

"Well, yeah, but..." Yuichi scratched his head. He'd had a feeling that that logic wasn't going to convince her, but he couldn't help wanting his dear little sister to have enough sleep at night.

"I'll try to keep it brief, then," he said. "Remember how I went up to the roof earlier today? Well, some armor fell onto it."

It felt a bit odd when he said it out loud, but he was just describing what he'd seen.

"Huh?" Yoriko asked.

"Armor?! Like the Shu'urushi-nuri Murasaki-ito Sugake-odoshi Gomaido Gusoku Nanban Kasashiki?!" In contrast to Yoriko's confusion, Mutsuko was immediately energized.

"Yeah, Yori's reaction is the normal one. And what was that?!" Yuichi shot back. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"Why don't you know about it?!" Mutsuko cried. "It's the Shu'urushi-nuri Murasaki-ito Sugake-odoshi Gomaido Gusoku Nanban Kasashiki! The personal armor of Keiji Maeda!"

"Is that some kind of incantation or something?" he asked.

As usual, just hearing the term again hadn't helped, so he decided to focus on the broad details. The point was, she was asking if it was Japanese-style armor.

"Orihara said it was like European armor from the 17th century," he asserted. "Heavy armor, she said, I think. It did look pretty thick, too. And it came with horse armor. We waited to see if anything else would fall, but that was the last of it."

"If Orihara said it, she's probably right," Mutsuko said. "Did you take a picture?"

"Oops." The fact that he had forgotten to do something so simple suggested that, despite his plays at level-headedness, the incident had actually left him very flustered. "I wonder what happened to it, though. The teachers were probably making their rounds, so..."

Yuichi couldn't imagine what the teachers would do upon finding a suit of armor on the roof.

"They'd probably assume it was a fake, right? Like a cosplay," Yoriko said. "So they'd take it in to the lost and found."

Despite Yuichi's assumptions that Yoriko would be disgusted by the bizarre conversation, she seemed surprisingly serious in engaging with it.

"You believe this bizarre story?" he asked.

“I believe everything you say, Big Brother. Besides, this is nothing compared to all the strange things that happened during our vacation.”

“A falling suit of armor is nothing?” Yuichi didn’t want her getting used to this sort of thing. He renewed his vow not to let Yoriko get caught up in any more strange business.

“You think it’ll still be there tomorrow? I wish I’d gone with you today!” Mutsuko cried.

“That’s right, you decided not to come to the roof with us,” Yuichi said. “What were you doing?”

“I heard there was a sale on kamas, so I went to buy one! It was such a steal!” she exclaimed.

“A kama? You mean like a sickle-and-chain?” Yuichi’s first assumption was that it was a weapon. That was the only thing he could imagine her going off to buy so gleefully.

“I mean a pot,” she said. “For boiling things! You know the Narikama ritual? I was thinking of using it for that!”

“I’ll ask about that later,” Yuichi said. For now, let’s talk about the armor.” He stopped his eager sister. If he let things get off track, he had a feeling they’d never get back to the original subject.

“Armor... Armor is the smallest locked room there is! And a mysterious falling death onto the roof! When you think about it, it’s like a real mystery story!” Mutsuko seemed to be getting excited by her own idea.

“Just to make sure you know, there was no one inside the armor, okay?” he asked peevishly. If a person had died in the armor, he wouldn’t be talking about this so calmly.

“Right, then I bet someone’s trying a new magic trick! If not, then it’s a fafrotskies phenomenon!” Mutsuko declared with her hand on her chin.

Yuichi blinked at the unfamiliar word. “What the hell is that, exactly?”

“Fafrotskies,” she said. “An abbreviation of FAlls FROm The SKIES. It refers to phenomena where things fall from the skies that you wouldn’t expect to fall. You mostly hear it with regards to fish, but there’ve also been reports of chunks of meat, building materials, pieces of metal, feces, blood, and lots of other things falling from the skies all over the world. This is the first I’ve heard of it happening with armor, though! Possible causes include tornadoes, things dropped by birds, and things falling out of airplanes. By the way, the person who coined the term fafrotskies is cryptozoologist Ivan T. Sanderson! He also thought up the name OOPArts! Doesn’t he just have the best naming sense?!”

“I see he’s patient zero for middle school syndrome,” Yuichi said.

“But I think we’d notice if there was a tornado, and I didn’t see anything flying over...”

He found himself trailing off. He hadn’t seen anything in the sky, but Aiko had.

“What’s wrong?” Mutsuko asked.

“Well, it’s just, Noro said she saw something floating in the sky. I couldn’t see it, myself, but she said there was an upside-down castle, with a dragon flying around it. If there really was a castle, it probably fell from there, right?”

“I wonder why couldn’t you see it,” Mutsuko mused. “Was Noro the only one who could?”

“Konishi was with me, and she said she couldn’t see it either,” Yuichi said. “I don’t know about Orihara.”

Kanako had looked up at the sky and muttered something, but he couldn’t remember what it had been.

“So some people see it and some people don’t... I’ll just have to go look for myself!” Mutsuko seemed excited by the promise of this curious phenomenon. “If I can’t see it, I’ll talk with Noro and see if I can get her to offer up some details!”

“Aren’t you bored, listening to us talk about this weird stuff?” he asked, turning to Yoriko. She had been very quiet for a while, so he’d thought she might be bored. But in fact, she was snoozing quietly, head drooped. “You’re asleep?!”

“Well, let’s adjourn for now. We can figure out the rest after we get to school tomorrow,” said Mutsuko.

Maybe she was right. Maybe they didn’t have enough information to go on at the moment.

“Yori, we’ve got to go back to our room,” Yuichi said to Yoriko, but she showed no signs of waking up. Yuichi sighed and lifted her up in his arms instead, to carry her out of Mutsuko’s room.

“Hey... you’re really awake, right?” he realized.

“You could tell?” Yoriko stuck out her tongue and smiled, realizing she was busted.

“The grinning made it pretty obvious.” As Yuichi carried her back, he wondered what she found so funny.

*****

Night had fallen over Seishin High School.

Makina Shikitani stood on the moonlit roof. She leaned against the fence, arms folded, and gazed towards the roof's center.

A suit of crumpled armor lay there.

There was a faint sound. The sound of metal scraping, metal warping.

The bent, flattened armor had slowly begun to regain its shape. The scattered parts moved, and gradually, began to assemble in one place.

"Kanako Orihara's awakening happened sooner than I expected," Makina said. "But it's a bit out of control... It will be useless to me if it's too chaotic. She'll need guidance."

The armor that had fallen from the sky had begun to move. A fascinating phenomenon, to be sure — but useless, Makina judged, for what she had planned for this school.

"That's an odd thing to be saying to yourself. Are you speaking to me, by chance?" The voice was coming from beside her.

Makina looked to the side, and up. There was a large bookshelf there, and on top of it sat a girl with red hair.

"Every time I see you, I wonder," Makina said. "Why are you always sitting on that thing when you appear?"

"It's convenient for getting around," said the girl. "It'll walk around for me, see?"

"It has legs?" Makina asked. That was the first she'd heard of it; she had always assumed it teleported or something.

"That's right. It grows them when it's time to move." As she spoke, the girl — Ende — jumped down off the shelf.

"A suit of armor fell from an island floating in the sky... it seems interesting. You really find it useless?" Ende pointed to the armor, which was rattling eerily.

It was hard to tell from where they stood, but there was something writhing around inside. The armor was beginning to be filled.

"I can't see the flying island..." Makina commented.

"Oh? You haven't read her book? But you can see the armor, right?" Ende asked, as if she found that very strange.

"I said her powers were out of control," Makina said. "Materialization should be the final stage, but it's already happening, piecemeal. Though perhaps that's a sign of her talent..." Makina furrowed her brow.

"Is that a problem?" asked Ende. "It still means that everything

will materialize in the end, doesn't it?"

"I don't want all of Glowsphere recreated; I want something more compact. And if this continues, it'll be too much for Kanako Orihara to handle. If she calls forth a world-consuming Demon Lord, she won't be able to control that, will she? Annihilation is the only future presented in the story of the world of Glowsphere." Maybe that was what Ende wanted, but Makina's goals lay in a different direction.

"Well, setting that aside... here are the documents on Kanako Orihara that you asked for," said Ende. "I tagged all the most important points." She opened the bookshelf, pulled out a volume, and handed it to Makina.

"If only you were this accommodating all the time," Makina said as she opened the volume.

"I *am* this accommodating all the time."

Ignoring Ende's protest, Makina changed the subject. "Speaking of which, we have a new member, don't we? With mind control powers and the ability to manipulate cause and effect... I'm envious, I have to say."

"Monika, you mean? She did have quite a lot of potential," Ende said. "But she tried to become human again and messed up at the outset. Right now she's lost nearly all of her power. It's a pity."

"Really?" asked Makina. "I thought that with her power, it would be easy to make humans do whatever she wanted. I may talk big about things like manipulating destiny, but all I really do is mundane negotiation and trading. It's pathetic."

"Creating a whole publishing company to make one girl an author is mundane?" Ende asked, baffled.

"What else could I do?" Makina asked. "One of the conditions to trigger 'Isekai Writer' was for her to publish a book. Who would have thought opening up an agency account would take such a long time?"

Makina flipped through the volume, and decided upon her next course of action. She pulled out her cell phone and called the publishing company she had founded.

"It's me. About Kanako Orihara. She submitted a number of plots, didn't she? Yes, push that one. The school story. *Demon Lord*? Can't we just cancel it?"

"Um... that's a bit reckless, isn't it? As a book lover myself, the thought stings a bit..." Ende said as she listened in. It was a rare sentiment, coming from her.

"Fine," Makina said, changing her instructions. "You don't have to cancel it, just tell her to give her full priority to the school story for now." She hung up the phone.

This was how Makina's "manipulating destiny" worked. She could investigate her target's situation, speculate about cause and effect

from Ende's materials, and change the environment to create the result she desired. But she wouldn't know for sure how things would turn out until she tried them. In practice, things rarely went as she expected, but for Makina, that was part of the fun.

"By the way, I suppose you didn't take my warning, did you?" Ende asked.

"Hmm? About Yuichi Sakaki? I did. We talked, and that was the end of it." When Makina had announced that she would be coming to the school, Ende had warned her not to get involved with Yuichi Sakaki. Makina wasn't sure why, but knowing that nothing good would come of turning Ende against her, she had taken her words into consideration.

"...Ah, well," Ende said. "However it turns out, it's your decision."

It was an evocative way of putting it. Did Ende like Yuichi? But her words, taken at face value, suggested Ende didn't care how things turned out for him. Which meant that if Makina killed Yuichi Sakaki, Ende wouldn't have a problem with it.

Over the course of their conversation, the horse armor had been changing, as well.

This process was much easier to follow than the human armor had been. The parts had begun floating in air, as if a horse was wearing them. Then, from within, dark red threads appeared, tying together to form the outline of a horse. It was as if an entire equine circulatory structure had simply appeared out of nowhere. A little later, white bones began to appear amidst them, and flesh and organs filled in the spaces between.

Then, in the blink of an eye, it was covered in skin and even letting out a neigh.

Beside the horse stood a man in armor. He seemed to have been revived in much the same way.

"What should we do about him?" Makina wondered. "Well, as long as he's here... I suppose I should make use of him." Makina walked up to the man in armor, who was looking around in confusion. "Do you understand the situation you're in?"

"I fear not," the man said. "I know not where I am, nor who you are, dear lady. All I know is that Lady Lasagna is missing." Despite saying he did not know, his attitude was one of confidence.

"Look up at the sky, if you please," she told him.

The man in armor did as he was told. "The castle is upside down... what is the meaning of this? Is this the Heroes' doing?!"

"From this world's perspective, it appears to be in something of a pocket space. I don't know if Demon Lord Lasagna is here, but even if you find her, you may not be able to return under your own power. Now, I do have a suggestion..."

As the man in armor stood there in confusion, Makina began to explain.

Chapter 3: Monika and Her Merry Band

After spending some time with Yuichi and the others on the roof, Kanako declined lunch with them, then went straight home.

"I'm back," Kanako said as she opened the door, but there was no one there to greet her.

Technically, she lived with her father, but her father was always busy with work and almost never at home. In practice, she basically lived alone.

Kanako's mother had left home when Kanako was in middle school; an amicable divorce.

The world had assumed the cause had been her father, for neglecting his family life in favor of work.

That was around the time Kanako had started thinking about killing herself. After meeting Mutsuko, though, she'd become unable to go through with it.

Today, Kanako had gone to the roof to test Mutsuko's curse. As strange as it might seem, the purpose of it was to give her courage. If she couldn't kill herself, she had no choice but to do her best.

She entered her room, changed, and laid down for a little while.

She had been thinking all this time about what she had seen from the roof.

If that was Zalegrande Castle, then perhaps she had come upon something that would take her to an isekai. That would be a wonderful thing. The problem was that it was the castle that was part of her story.

It wasn't the Zalegrande Castle she had seen in her youth, and still saw in her dreams. The original Zalegrande Castle was beautiful, but much more simple. When she had decided to set her story there, Kanako had added more towers and such, and the castle she had seen today had those. The tall black and white towers were especially conspicuous.

Yuichi hadn't seemed to have seen it, but Aiko had, which meant that it wasn't a hallucination.

As her mind tumbled over the meaning of that upside-down castle and the falling armor, Kanako grew restless, and eventually sat up. She didn't have time to be distracted by such ambiguous matters.

She went to the kitchen and ate the leftovers of the impromptu stir-fry she had made the night before, returned to her room, took a seat at her desk, and booted up her laptop.

Her novel had been published just a few days ago, and now she had to write the second volume. It was a grueling schedule, with no time to rest.

Kanako plunged into the task. She knew where the plot was going, so now all she had to do was write, write, write.

As her fingers quietly danced over the keys, the sound of her ringing cell phone brought her back to herself.

She answered it swiftly. It was her supervising editor.

"Sorry to disturb you so late at night," the editor said. "Could I have a minute of your time?"

Was it really that late? Kanako wondered. She checked the time, and found that at some point, it had gotten past midnight.

"Yes, what is it?" she asked. "I've finished half of the second volume of *Demon Lord*, so the deadline shouldn't be a problem..." Thinking it was a motivation call, Kanako decided to nip it in the bud. She didn't need him nagging her over something that was already dealt with.

"Um, I'm sorry to say this, but the second volume has been delayed," he said uncomfortably.

The words struck her dumb. She felt herself plunging backwards into an abyss.

"Hello? Hello?" The voice called again, sounding terribly far away.

The realities of publishing were harsh nowadays. If the sales weren't good enough, your line could be canceled with the wave of a hand. She knew that, and she had feared it, but she had thought she had been able to avoid it.

"Um... but you said it was selling rather well, didn't you?" she asked faintly. "You okayed the second volume's plot, and I've been working on the manuscript..."

She barely managed to wring the words out of her throat, but she could hear her voice trembling. She had been told that volume 1 was doing well. They had told her to construct it as a series because they intended to keep publishing them.

"Um, well, I didn't say it was canceled," the editor said. "Just that it was delayed..."

"But that's how these things work, isn't it?" she burst out. "You see it all the time! They won't say clearly that the book is over, they just stop putting them out..." She had lost control of her tone. The next thing she knew, tears were streaming down her cheeks. She only now realized how much she had invested in that story.

"It's okay," the editor said quickly. "It will be published, I guarantee. We just want you to write another story. You submitted a few plotlines, didn't you? We were thinking of putting one of those

out, first."

That calmed Kanako down a little bit. "...Understood. Do you want the one where the hero is split into seven people?"

"What? Did you have a plot that challenging? No, I meant the one where the school gets sucked into an isekai..."

"Um... does it have to be that one?" She didn't have much confidence in that plot. They had asked her to submit every plot she had in mind, but she had never actually planned to write that one.

"Yes, that's what the president wants. We like the basic plot of it, but we think it's lacking something. Could you make the protagonist stronger? One of those 'strongest in the world' types, maybe add some 'god mode' elements? Those are very popular lately. It might be hard to sell without it."

"Yes, um... okay. I'll think about it..." Kanako mumbled. A school story. A god-mode protagonist story. Both were fields Kanako was weak in, but she couldn't turn down the job.

"We'd like to publish it in November in place of *Demon Lord*, so please start right away," the editor said.

"...It's the beginning of September right now, isn't it?" Kanako was starting to feel slightly dizzy. She would have to write an entire book based on something she had only a rough plot outline for. In practice, considering everything else on her schedule, she would have less than a month to do it in.

"We're still in startup mode, so we need to guarantee a certain number of titles," the editor explained. "I know it's asking a lot, but we hope you'll find a way to make it happen."

The conversation was over, but all Kanako could do was grip her phone and stare into space.

"What am I going to do...?"

A school story, about students.

Kanako didn't know much about either.

*****

It was the second day of the second term.

For once, Yuichi was walking to school with Mutsuko.

"Hey, Yu, when was the last time we walked to school together?" Mutsuko seemed to be in even more high spirits than usual.

"Before I was in high school, at least," he said. The thought of walking to school with his older sister embarrassed him. But at the same time, seeing Mutsuko so openly happy about it made Yuichi wonder if he was being too stubborn.

"I bet you're all, 'If we walked to school together, all our friends would spread rumors about us! It's embarrassing!'" Mutsuko said the line — Yuichi was sure he had heard it somewhere before — with

gusto.

"No, but what kind of guy in high school wants to walk to school with his big sister every day?" he asked.

"Are you saying there's something embarrassing about siblings walking to school together?" Mutsuko put a hand to her chest with exaggerated indignation.

"It's less that we're siblings and more that *you're embarrassing*!" he shot back.

As usual, Mutsuko's theatrics — giving no consideration to what anyone around her thought — had made her the center of attention. It was hard to ignore someone overreacting to everything at peak volume.

Just as he was starting to regret his decision to walk to school with her after all, Aiko joined them. "Morning!"

Nero was beside her, in his dog form, just as he had been yesterday. Nero had decided to serve as her bodyguard until she got to school. Aiko had awakened as a vampire, if still incompletely, which meant that the denizens of the world of darkness now had their eyes on her. Yuichi didn't know the full story, but he had heard that some people might try to kill her.

"Noro! You said you saw something weird in the sky? What about now?" Mutsuko asked eagerly, broaching the subject the moment she arrived.

Aiko looked up at the sky above the school. "I... guess I can't see it now. It was the same way yesterday, though. After I left the school grounds and turned back, I couldn't see it anymore."

"Well, we'd better get up to the roof and have a look!" Mutsuko declared. "Let's all meet up there during lunch break! Oh, and while we're up there, maybe we can have lunch around the armor?"

"What kind of plan is that?" Yuichi asked. "Besides, wouldn't other people go up to the roof during lunch? The fallen armor might cause a big commotion..."

But there was a commotion already in progress.

As Yuichi reached the school gate, the first thing he saw within was a large crowd of students, looking up at the sky and talking to each other. Getting a bad feeling in his gut, Yuichi swiftly passed through the gate.

"There! There's something hovering!"

"What? Are you sure you're not crazy?"

"What? Am I crazy, too, then? There's obviously something there!"

"I don't understand a single thing you guys are talking about!"

The atmosphere felt a little bit dangerous. Yuichi looked up at the sky like the rest of them, but he couldn't see anything.

“Ah... I actually can see it...” Aiko arrived next to him, and looked up at the sky.

“That’s amazing!” Mutsuko cried. “What is it? An upside-down castle? I see castle walls, but there doesn’t seem to be much emphasis on defense... hmm, can’t identify the architectural style, but I guess it’s less of a castle and more of a palace, huh? A style-over-substance thing?”

“Huh? ...Sis, you can see it?” Yuichi asked.

“Huh?! I don’t believe it! Yu, you *can’t* see it?” Mutsuko said with a theatrically teasing tone.

“Dammit! I feel so left out...”

It didn’t seem like everyone could see it, which meant the students gathered around the gate were divided into those who could and those who couldn’t. It seemed like there were more students who couldn’t see it, but enough of them could that it couldn’t be dismissed as lying, or a figment of their imagination.

“I wonder what’s going on here...” Yuichi strained his eyes as he looked up into the sky above the school, but nothing had changed. He still couldn’t see anything.

Having a castle floating in the sky was definitely a bizarre situation, but that was all it was. It didn’t seem to be affecting the students on the ground in any way.

Of course, none of the students were so obsessed with the bizarre castle that they were willing to be late to class, so the chaos rectified itself naturally.

It was quite the subject of conversation inside the school, too, but since there was no proof, no amount of discussion could resolve it. Those who could see the castle eventually began giving up on trying to convince the others that it was there.

“Sakaki, didn’t you promise to come by my restaurant?” Tomomi was waiting in front of the classroom with a smile on her face. Thinking it wasn’t a subject to be discussed in the classroom, Yuichi led Aiko and Tomomi to a landing on one of the less popular stairwells.

“I forgot. Sorry.” Yuichi hadn’t given much thought to Tomomi’s one-sided promise. He had gone home with Aiko and eaten at a different restaurant instead.

“Wow, you are so good at making it feel like it’s the end of the conversation. Truly amazing, Sakaki...” Tomomi had been angry, but Yuichi’s attitude had taken all the fight out of her, it seemed.

“I guess it’s why he’s so shameless about it...” Aiko said.

It upset Yuichi slightly to hear even Aiko say that.

“Well, if you forgot, you forgot,” said Tomomi. “But could you seriously come by after club today? I want to hear the rest of the

story.”’

“Okay.” Yuichi nodded after she pressured him. At any rate, it probably would be good for them to talk about it. She might know something that would be useful to him.

Lunchtime arrived.

With lunchbox in hand, Yuichi and the others — Mutsuko, Aiko, and Natsuki — headed for the roof.

Once they arrived, Yuichi immediately took stock of the situation. The armor that had fallen there yesterday was gone, and the other students on the roof showed no signs of panic at all.

“It’s gone,” said Aiko.

“Yeah, gone,” Yuichi responded lightly, then went to check the spot the armor had fallen the day before. There was quite a bit of damage to the floor, but that was no infallible proof that something had fallen there.

“It’s not here! You said it fell here?” Mutsuko’s disappointment was plain to see, which made Yuichi feel slightly guilty, even though he hadn’t actually done anything wrong.

“It did, but... hey Noro,” Yuichi said. “Is there still a castle in the air?”

“Yeah... huh? It feels like it’s gotten bigger... is it descending?” Aiko said in confusion as she looked up at the sky.

“Do you see anything, Takeuchi?” Yuichi asked.

“Nothing,” said Natsuki, looking up at the sky, too.

“What could it mean? Did someone carry the armor away?” Yuichi wondered.

According to Kanako, the armor was quite heavy; about 30 kg. It should have caused quite a commotion if someone had found it lying there.

“I see,” Mutsuko began. “The lack of commotion indicates that someone quietly carried it off before it was discovered by the student body. That would be the logical thought. *But*!” She raised a finger, her expression that of someone about to raise a brilliant counterpoint. “Consider this: what if the armor stood up on its own, and walked away in the middle of the night?!”

“That made perfect sense, right up until the ‘but’!” Yuichi exclaimed. If that counted as a legitimate hypothesis, then nothing was off limits.

“Um, but we can’t say for sure that that didn’t happen...” Aiko murmured. She must not have found anything odd about the idea of armor walking off on its own.

“Maybe there was a commotion in the morning, and it was carried to the lost and found?” Natsuki pointed out, cool-headedly.

Given the fuss about the flying castle that morning, it was possible that the commotion over the armor had just been overshadowed by that. If so, they could find out more by going to the teachers' office... but "Did you find some armor on the roof?" would be a difficult question to ask.

"Maybe the owner came out of the sky and picked it up?" Aiko offered, sounding like she was trying to propose anything that came to mind.

"It's more logical than claiming the armor just walked off somewhere..." Yuichi was starting to get a vaguely uneasy feeling about all of this.

After class, they headed for their club room.

They entered the old school building and walked up the creaking wooden stairs to the second floor. At the far end of the corridor was the survival club's meeting room.

The old school building was used for the liberal arts clubs, but Yuichi didn't know anything about the other clubs that met there. All he knew was that the newspaper club's room was next door to theirs.

As usual, the room was filled with random clutter. Kanako was sitting at the long table, resting her head upon it. Her gaze was distant, which wasn't unusual, but there was something especially listless in it today.

"Orihara, you didn't come here with Sis?" Yuichi asked.

Kanako sat up as she realized Yuichi was there. "It seems the elder Sakaki is helping a friend with a lesson. She said that she'd come soon, though."

"...Does my sister have friends at school?" The idea was a mild shock to Yuichi. He knew that Mutsuko had weird friends, but he couldn't imagine she got along well with the regular people at school.

"What a rude thing to say," Kanako said teasingly. "I'm one of her friends, you know."

Kanako technically was a bit weird, but Yuichi wasn't going to say that out loud.

"Sakaki the Younger, what are you doing here by yourself?" Kanako asked. "Where are Noro and Takeuchi?"

"They're on cleaning duty today, so I came by early. Is something the matter, Orihara?" Yuichi added as he sat down across from her.

Kanako had always had a nonchalant air about her, and it was hard to know what she was thinking — in a different way from Natsuki's poker face — but something about her seemed different today.

"I suppose I have something on my mind." Kanako gave him a gloomy smile.

Yuichi changed the subject. “By the way, the armor that was on the roof yesterday is gone. I wonder what was up with that... It seemed like you knew what kind of armor it was, right?”

“It was heavy armor, the type worn by cavalry,” said Kanako. “It covered the head to the knees, which let a horseman ride a horse and fire a gun. No matter how tough they made the armor, though, advances in firearms always superseded it, so they eventually abandoned it altogether.”

Yuichi thought back. Now that she’d mentioned it, there had been no armor below the knee. So that was the full set, just as it was.

“Um, why did you want to go to the roof, Orihara?” he asked. Maybe it was rude to ask that again, after she had already refused to answer once, but Yuichi was really curious.

“I was wondering if I could kill myself now,” she said.

Yuichi froze. Was she serious?

Kanako giggled. “I knew you would be surprised. Your sister would say ‘that’s boring’ right away.”

“Um, can I ask why you would want to do that?” Yuichi ventured.

“It’s very simple,” said Kanako. “My story got an awful review on the internet. It made me want to kill myself.”

“...That’s pretty drastic...” He didn’t know what criticism she was receiving, exactly, but it made Yuichi worry about her mental state.

“But once I was up on the roof, I couldn’t find the courage to kill myself, so that just confirmed it,” she said. “It means I’ll have to keep soldiering on.”

Yuichi wasn’t sure how to respond to that. It was a problem beyond what a high school freshman could handle.

After a short pause, Kanako spoke up again, timidly. “Hey... may I ask you for a favor, Sakaki the Younger?”

“The roof again?” he asked. This was how she had asked him the last time.

“No. I was wondering if you’d go into town with me, to help me with my research.”

“Sure, but your story is fantasy, isn’t it?” he asked. “What research would you be doing in town?”

“Well... actually, they’ve delayed the second volume of *Demon Lord*...”

That explained why she was acting so strangely. “You mean, um, it was canceled?” That was another question that was hard to ask.

“They wouldn’t give me a clear reason... but they asked if I would write a story with a different plot. A school story and a god-mode protagonist story. So I wanted to do some research out in town. I don’t go walking around town very often, so I don’t know where it is that normal high school students like to go.”

“Sure... but shouldn’t you go with your boyfriend or something?” Yuichi asked. Kanako was so pretty, Yuichi naturally assumed she had a boyfriend.

“Um... I don’t have a boyfriend,” Kanako answered, seeming surprised by the suggestion.

“Huh? Really? You seem like the type of girl who’d have guys beating down her door...”

“It’s just that... I don’t have any confidence that I could love my children,” she said.

“That’s quite a leap!” Yuichi couldn’t figure out how she had gone as far as children in an instant.

“Oh? I mean, I think that dating is a lead-up to marriage, which would naturally lead to children...”

Yuichi was at a loss for how to respond. Now that she’d explained it, he sort of understood, but most people weren’t thinking that far ahead when it came to something as simple as dating.

“Um, if we’re just walking around town, that’s okay, I think,” he said at last. Instead of pursuing that any further, he decided to bring them back to the original subject. He didn’t mind indulging his senior in club by hanging around with her in town for a little while.

“Really? Would this Sunday be all right?” Kanako clapped her hands together, sounding genuinely pleased. It was as if the weighty subjects from before had never even been broached.

“Sure. Where in town do you want to go?”

They decided to go to the shopping district close to the school, and that they’d meet up in the station around noon.

“By the way, you mentioned a ‘god-mode protagonist’ story earlier. Is that really your style?” Yuichi asked.

The other club members hadn’t arrived yet, so Yuichi decided to inquire about a subject he’d been curious about in the previous conversation. Although she liked fantasy, Yuichi had assumed from her appearance that she liked more peaceful stories.

“Well, my editor said it’s what’s popular right now, so I should put one in,” said Kanako. “It’s a bit of a problem for me... um, it’s not that I don’t like fighting, or anything like that...”

“Well, I know that much...” She was so knowledgeable about Warring States Period and armor, after all.

Realizing that if the conversation continued they’d end up talking about Kanako’s novel, Yuichi was just wondering how to proceed when the door suddenly opened with a bang.

“Leave the god-mode stories to me!” Mutsuko announced, barging in.

“That was sudden!” Yuichi exclaimed. “How did you know we were talking about that?”

“I’m always monitoring this room! And not just the club room! I have ears in all the major school facilities!” she declared.

“Oh, yeah... you mentioned that once...”

When Aiko’s brother Kyoya had taken over the school, Mutsuko had mentioned that she had the whole school wired. It was clearly a crime, but Mutsuko had a tenuous relationship with the law to start with, so he knew that it would be pointless to try to object.

“Now! What would you like to know about god-mode stories?!” Mutsuko took her usual spot in front of the whiteboard, addressing the room with unnecessary theatricality.

“Um... nothing,” Kanako said.

“Why not? You were just talking about it with Orihara, you flirt!”

“I’m not a flirt!”

“Liar! She mentioned something about having children, and things were clearly about to get hot and heavy here in the club room! Of course, it was with Orihara, so I’ll forgive you this time, but...”

“We were *not* talking about that! I think your bugs need some maintenance!” Yuichi exclaimed.

“W-Well never mind!” Mutsuko stuttered, then came back with renewed force, perhaps to cover her embarrassment. “Anyway! As someone with a lot of opinions about god-mode stories, I also have extensive thoughts about the current state of what are *considered* god-mode stories!”

“Yeah, didn’t you call yourself a god-mode purist once?” Yuichi asked. He had heard that Mutsuko was the type of person who liked her protagonists to be invincible, but he couldn’t imagine what else that entailed. Not that he actually wanted to know.

“Yes! They say that light novels nowadays don’t sell unless they’ve got god-mode elements, and I also hear a lot of authors complaining about that! But then none of the stories actually see the god-mode through, so I’ve gotta wonder, what are they talking about?!”

“Really? I’ve heard that’s all you get these days,” Yuichi said.

“Not at all!” Mutsuko exclaimed. “Even if they start in god-mode, they never commit all the way to the end! They introduce a rival on the main character’s level, or a final boss who’s stronger, or they give him a moral dilemma, or some kind of challenge! And even if they don’t, they’ll still have them be dominated by a violent love interest, or something else to try to keep it balanced!”

“Well, yeah... if the protagonist just dominates everything the whole way through, there’s no tension, is there?” he asked. Any enemy who appeared would just be instantly vanquished. A perfect protagonist who solved all his problems in seconds, without anything to worry over... wouldn’t it just get monotonous?

“Yes! That’s what the writers think! However! That’s not what I’m

after! I want them to be god-mode from beginning to end! And this is not a minority opinion!"

"That's true," Kanako admitted. "I agree that most writers want their stories to be full of ups and downs. I tried thinking up a god-mode protagonist story when you recommended it, but there wasn't anywhere to go from there. It ended up being an ensemble story where it was the Demon Lord Army the protagonist was associated with that was the strongest in the world."

"A god-mode group story, right?" Mutsuko asked. "But that's fleeing from the god-mode concept, in its own way! God-mode should be about a lone protagonist! Those teacher stories that are getting popular lately are another form of running away from the concept! Those don't count as god-mode either!"

"What are you even talking about?!" Yuichi burst out. He hated how she treated these things like common sense, but Mutsuko was always like this, so Yuichi gave up. He'd just let her finish her rant.

"They're stories about a god-mode protagonist teaching a bunch of dunces!" Mutsuko declared. "A hybrid, where the protagonist can be strongest, with the character development given to the dunces, like a camphor to the god-mode monotony! And making the protagonist a teacher makes it okay for him to have a superiority complex and be condescending!"

"You just wanted to say 'camphor,' I think..." Yuichi muttered. He had a feeling she was not using that word correctly.

"But I think that's a cop out! A truly god-mode protagonist wouldn't do something as boring as training others, he'd take care of everything himself! If he can take care of everything himself, why would he spend all his time training dunces? And if he can't take care of everything himself, he's not really god-mode! That's what I think!" Mutsuko struck the whiteboard with a bang.

"That doesn't leave much to work with..." Yuichi sighed, just as the door opened and Aiko and Natsuki arrived.

"Oh, everyone's here!" Mutsuko exclaimed. "Then let's hold today's meeting about god-mode protagonists! Let's start with the element that you must never include in a god-mode story, the 'runs while crying' scene! This is nothing but a betrayal of readers' expectations!"

"Um?" Aiko was clearly confused by the subject as she took her seat.

Once club was over, Yuichi led Aiko and Natsuki to the back gate of the school.

Most people didn't go out the back, so at the moment, they were the only ones there. That made Monika, in her elementary school

uniform, stand out all the more as they saw her waiting just outside the gate.

"Hello, Big Br—" Monika was waving, but whatever she was about to say was cut off as a pale hand reached out from behind the gate, grabbed her, and dragged her off.

"Huh?" Aiko asked, stunned.

"Oh, no need to worry." Yuichi kept walking, leaving the school grounds. Behind the gate, they found Yoriko and Monika. The former had balled her hands into fists, and was grinding them against the latter's temples in a way that looked extremely painful.

Sitting nearby was Nero, in his dog form, minding his own business.

"I suppose you didn't panic because you recognized your little sister, but it's a bit creepy that you can identify her by only her arm at that distance," said Natsuki, walking beside Yuichi. She evaluated him with her usual cool gaze. It wasn't any different from how she usual did it, but he felt a slight sense of rebuke in her words this time.

"Takeuchi... was that analysis a little malicious?" Yuichi asked.

He could identify not just Yoriko, but Mutsuko, Aiko, and Natsuki that way. But he restrained from commenting on that. It would just be kicking a hornet's nest.

"Even if you are a creepy siscon, I still accept you," Natsuki said. "Don't worry."

"I wasn't worried, and I'm not a siscon!" Yuichi snarled.

"It's worst when they don't even realize it," Natsuki said. "But it's all right. Even if society finds out about your shameful fetishes and ostracizes you, I will not abandon you." She almost made it sound like she wanted that to be the case.

"Um, Yoriko, what are you doing?" Aiko asked in concern as she arrived, a few steps after.

"For her to casually call my brother 'big brother' just because she is in elementary school is, in my eyes, a tremendous crime," Yoriko said viciously. "Thus, I was punishing her. As my brother's true little sister, the right to refer to him as 'big brother' belongs solely to me. In light of the fact that I was nearly stripped of that right, I hope you will understand that this is a very mild punishment. Naturally, I know that she is very familiar with him, and I have complicated feelings about her referring to him by his first name, but if my brother has chosen to allow that, then I will not complain. However, intentionally referring to my brother as 'big brother' was a clear attempt to undermine me, personally, so I will not deny that my actions also contain a measure of revenge."

Yoriko continued applying the painful hold as she spoke. The middle knuckle of each fist was extended just a little bit as she ground

Monika's temples with them.

"I'm sure she won't do it again, so please, let her go," Aiko said with a wince.

"I'm not stopping because you asked me to, but I do think I've done enough. I don't wish to displease my brother by going too far." Yoriko abruptly pulled her hands apart, and Monika slumped to the ground.

"H-Hey! You can't do that to a little kid!" Monika immediately stood up again and forcefully complained at her.

"Huh? I thought you just looked like a kid. You're actually the same age as my brother, aren't you? And my *elder*, as well." There was no respect in her words; Yoriko just seemed to be mocking her.

"That doesn't matter!" the girl shouted. "Once everything's resolved, I'll be starting over from elementary school! My mind and body are both trapped this way!"

"Tee hee. What kind of niche are you trying to fill?" Yoriko theatrically put a hand to her mouth as she laughed.

"Oh, jeez! You really get on my nerves!" Monika exclaimed.

"I said we were meeting at the restaurant, right?" Yuichi asked. "What are you doing here?"

"I caught sight of Yoriko and decided to tease her, and it ended up like this!" Monika started angrily, but perhaps realizing it had been her own fault, she calmed down immediately. "Anyway, are you sure this restaurant is okay? I don't want to be attacked again, so I want some place without too many people." This time it was Monika who had asked for the meeting, but she had let Yuichi choose the place.

"I have no guarantee we won't be attacked, but there definitely won't be many people there," Yuichi said, knowing Tomomi would yell at him if she heard him say that.

The group headed for the nearby Chinese restaurant, Nihao the China.

As usual, the restaurant's interior had a slightly grimy air about it; Tomomi insisted they cleaned it properly, but Yuichi had his doubts. The floor was slippery, like it was slick with oil, and the condiment holders on the table were dirty with dripped seasonings.

For once, the shop already had a customer when they showed up, but it was a familiar face.

"Hey! Been a while, huh?" The boy sitting at the round table stood up. He had blond hair, blue eyes, and foreign-looking features. His name was Kyoshiro Ibaraki. He was a type of oni, as indicated by the label above his head: "Ibaraki-doji."

Apparently his ancestors had come to Japan from somewhere else, which was why he looked Western, but he insisted that he himself was

Japanese.

"What are you doing here?" Yuichi asked, not bothering to hide his disappointment at seeing him.

"I'm taking care of Monika, so it's my business, right? Why didn't you call me?" Ibaraki accused.

"But I did call you. Didn't you get all the vibes I was sending?" Yuichi said in as dry a tone as possible.

"What, are you psychic now?" Ibaraki demanded. "You know there's this modern invention called a cell phone, right?"

"I don't have your number."

"Then let's exchange numbers!" Seeming excited about the prospect, Ibaraki pulled his phone out of his pocket.

"Nah, takes too long," said Yuichi. "If I need to get in touch with you, I'll use a messenger spirit or something."

"That would take even longer! Can you even use those?"

"I'll start studying now," Yuichi said.

"You're not gonna try to contact me at all!" Ibaraki cried. "Anyway, Monika, you're the one who called the meeting, right? Why'd you leave me out, huh?"

Monika was currently holed up in the oni village. The attack on the cafe had made it clear that there were people after Monika, so Yuichi had had no choice but to leave her in Ibaraki's care.

Which meant that even if Yuichi didn't contact him, Ibaraki had clearly assumed that Monika would bring him along.

"Huh? I didn't think it was any of your business," Monika said with a dumbfounded expression. It was an awful thing to say to the person looking after you.

That being the case, Ibaraki must have learned about the restaurant from overhearing Monika talking on the phone.

"I thought this might happen. That's why I was sending you all those vibes..." Yuichi said, consolingly. He actually felt a little bad for him.

"You think I'm gonna thank you for that?!" Ibaraki shouted. Not even he was that desperate for kindness.

"Anyway, quit hanging around in the entrance. You're blocking the other customers!" announced a stern-looking waitress in a cheongsam, Tomomi Hamasaki.

"But we chose this restaurant because there would be no other customers," Yuichi said.

At Tomomi's urging, the group took seats at the round table Ibaraki had staked out. Clockwise from Yuichi, the seating was Aiko, Natsuki, Ibaraki, Monika, and Yoriko. There were no other customers, as usual.

The second Monika and Yoriko sat down, there was a scramble

over the menus.

"Monika and Yori seem pretty close, huh?" Yuichi commented.

"Hmm, I'm not sure about that. I suppose they get along well enough, though," Aiko said with a slightly pained smile.

"Wow, six whole customers!" Tomomi stopped by with a bright smile and a tray of water glasses.

"I know you said something about customers coming, but do you think you could close up?" Yuichi asked. He didn't want anyone else to overhear what they were talking about.

Tomomi made a big show of thinking about the matter. "That's an awfully big thing to ask on the spur of the moment, but... six actual customers weighed against our potential customers... sure, okay."

Tomomi took each of their orders and was on her way to the kitchen when Monika stood up.

"Okay, the Monika Army for the Divine Vessels War is hereby assembled!" Monika looked to each person around the table in turn.

There were six people there: the serial killer, Natsuki; the oni, Ibaraki; the vampire, Aiko; the Outer, Monika; the ordinary middle school student, Yoriko; and the high school student, Yuichi.

The werewolf Nero, who could be considered part of Aiko's forces, was also waiting outside.

"This balance is terrible! What kind of party is this?" Monika erupted as she took stock of the "army" in front of her.

"How should I know?" Yuichi said with a sigh. "And you're the one who picked them out..." It seemed a little late to start complaining, in his opinion.

"The only useful ones here are the oni and the serial killer!" Monika protested. "What use is a normal middle school student going to be?"

"I contribute more than you do, Monika," Yoriko muttered in annoyance.

"I think Nero would be useful," Aiko said, tacitly admitting that she herself would not be.

"Anyway, we all know Yuichi'll win any fights they throw at us, right?" Ibaraki added.

He spoke with the weight of authority, having lost to Yuichi once before. Natsuki nodded in agreement.

"W-Well, never mind!" Monika said. "Anyway, we need to decide our strategy from here on out!"

"Hey, hey! Stop this right *now*!" Tomomi, having brought the food, struck the table to interrupt.

"Hamasaki, what kind of a waitress are you?" Yuichi stared, appalled by her lack of professionalism.

"How can you talk about this without me here?" Tomomi

demanded. “Weren’t you going to tell me what happened on your summer vacation?”

“Who is *this*?” Monika asked, baffled. She had apparently thought Tomomi was no more than staff.

“Her name is Tomomi Hamasaki,” said Yuichi. “She knows a lot about a lot of things. She’s the one who told me about that worldview stuff, so it’s possible she could be useful for this, too.”

“Okay,” Monika said. “If Yuichi trusts you, that’s enough for me. But if you hear what I have to say, it means you’re on our side. Is that okay?”

“I don’t mind joining you, as an individual,” said Tomomi. “But as part of Nihao the China, I have to stay neutral. Is that good enough?”

“How is that different?” Yuichi asked.

“Well, I guess it means, don’t count on my dad’s help.”

“We weren’t planning on it,” Yuichi said. Tomomi was already sticking her neck in in a way Yuichi hadn’t asked for. He had no desire to grow the team any further. It was too large already, in his opinion.

“Anyway, tell me what happened after the truck crashed into the restaurant.” Tomomi leaned over the table, bubbling with curiosity. “Something else must have happened to get you all gathered here, right?”

Just to get the whole story straight, Yuichi decided, maybe he should just tell everyone the whole story.

He picked up after the event at the cafe.

Chapter 4: Let's Finally Talk About Summer Vacation

The truck's impact had left the cafe in ruins. The bloodstained giant had descended from the cabin, with the word "Immortal (9)" hanging over his head.

Aiko and Monika were behind Yuichi. Nero was at his feet, in dog form.

A panic was starting to overtake the dumbfounded patrons and servers as they slowly came to grips with their situation.

The giant had thrown one of the truck's mirrors, but he hadn't done anything since then, except to raise his right arm at eye-level, as if to confirm the fact that it was bent at an unusual angle. Perhaps that was the reason his attack hadn't landed.

The giant's body was in the process of healing. He was covered in blood, but the bleeding had already stopped, and the large hollow in his chest had slowly began to expand to a more normal shape. Even the glass shards that peppered his body were being ejected, slowly, one after another.

The restaurant was in a strange state of equilibrium. The giant clearly intended to stand there until he was completely healed, assuming that Yuichi and the others didn't do something. That might give them a little time, but Yuichi couldn't afford to just stand idly by.

"Hey," Yuichi asked Monika, his eyes fixed on the giant. "Do you know who that is? It says he's 'Immortal.'"

He hadn't seen a number in parentheses in the label like that before. He'd seen things like "Anthromorph (Cow)," but this seemed different.

"He's the worst possible person I can think of to have after you..." Monika whispered, her eyes wide in despair.

"Can I have the short version?" Yuichi asked.

"He's a god-killer. An immortal, supernaturally strong, with the power to see the future."

"That's too much stuff..." Yuichi had asked to be sure, but the explanation wasn't really helping. "Any idea why he's after you?"

"I told you before, the battle over the secret treasures!" Monika exclaimed. "Hey, what should we do? I think this thing could kill me!"

"You were bragging before about being invincible, weren't you?" Yuichi asked, skeptically.

Monika took Yuichi's hand. He could feel her trembling. In the now-deserted restaurant, he turned his mind to thoughts of what to do next.

First, they should get away. This wasn't a good place to fight.

But they were also in a business district, close to the last station on the line. He tried to think of a better place to fight, with fewer people around, but nothing was coming to mind.

"Noro! It's a little far away, but do you know the exercise park?" he called.

"Yeah, I think so," Aiko said without much confidence.

"Go there ahead of us," Yuichi ordered. "We'll meet you later." He wanted to guarantee Aiko's safety before anybody else's. If Nero was with her, she should be safe.

"Um, but..." Aiko began.

"Just do it," Yuichi said. "Trust me."

"Okay." Aiko nodded, then started climbing over the broken wall. Without even needing to be told, Nero followed her.

Yuichi turned his focus back to the giant. If there was a chance he was after Aiko, he would try to stop him now, but the giant didn't budge.

That meant Aiko wasn't his target. Maybe he didn't care about anything but Monika.

The giant continued moving, leisurely checking each part of his body.

He seemed perfectly at ease; the giant didn't care about the damage he had done, nor did he show a single sign of concern about the commotion he had caused. Yuichi had fought audacious enemies before, but none so bold as to charge directly into a city full of people.

Apparently fully recovered now, the giant's hand reached out. It took a moment for Yuichi to realize what he was about to do.

The giant's hand grabbed the truck's warped door, and in a split second, tore it free from its hinges. It had been an effortless move, like ripping a sheet of paper. It didn't feel real.

Yuichi quickly hoisted Monika up under his arm and started to run.

The giant threw the steel door.

It flew at them with a roar, making the hole in the cafe wall bigger as it flew out the other side.

There was a scream.

Yuichi sprinted out of the cafe, casting a glance back at the blood-stained tragedy. A rubbernecker who had stopped to get a picture of the incident had been reduced to a bloody pulp. It was an incredible tragedy, but Yuichi couldn't afford to think about it right now.

"This is really bad!" he shouted. "What the hell is that guy

thinking?"

"We're dead, we're dead, we're dead! I told you, we're dead! I hate this!" Monika wailed.

Yuichi dove recklessly down the avenue as evening fell. He had no idea where he was trying to go. He was a slave to his own growing panic.

"Dammit! If I'd known this would happen, I would have tried to finish it back there—" But his enemy wasn't going to give him time to dwell on his choices.

Something flew at him from behind, and Yuichi dodged with a sidestep.

A cash register from the cafe passed through the empty space where he had been a moment ago, and buried itself into a car that was driving ahead of him.

There was an excruciating noise as the car spun around. The cars behind it failed to stop in time, leading to a pileup. The street was in pandemonium.

The giant was definitely after Monika — and, given the way he'd crashed the truck into the cafe, he didn't care about any casualties he caused in the pursuit.

"Dammit! There are too many people!" Yuichi cursed. Weaving through the congestion was just going to get more people hurt.

"There! Turn right, onto that street!" Monika screamed as she pointed at an alleyway.

Yuichi followed her directions. He was dubious about putting his faith in Monika, but it was better than running around mindlessly.

Without dropping his pace, he flew into a maze of back alleys. He felt something else fly past him, and heard another destructive crash.

The minute they entered the back streets, it was like they were lost in another world; there was no sign of people at all, now. Still hauling Monika under his arm, Yuichi continued to dash through the dim alleyways.

At last, Yuichi set Monika down and decided to take a quick breather.

He'd run and run, choosing between interwoven alleyways at random. That should afford them a little time.

"I hope you're not thinking 'we're safe now,' are you?" Monika asked.

Yuichi had put a lot of distance between them and the giant, and it would be hard for him to trace them in the city. But Monika's expression remained grim.

"I mean... he's after you because of this. And he probably won't stop chasing it..." Monika pulled out something round and showed it timidly to Yuichi.

Yuichi stared in shock. It looked like a human eyeball, but he could tell quickly that it was artificial.

"A glass eye?" he asked.

"It's the Evil God's Right Eye," Monika said. "It's one of the secret treasures we're fighting over. We call it a Divine Vessel. That giant has the Left Eye, and... hey! Are you listening?"

"Yeah, I'm listening," he said. "But I don't think I'll have time to hear the whole story."

Yuichi could sense the giant's approach from the faint footsteps resounding in the distance. He was still some ways away, but definitely homed in on their location.

"Divine Vessels resonate sometimes," Monika said. "While they're resonating, the bearer of each can tell where the others are. That's why he knows where I am so easily."

"Then why don't you just throw it away?" Yuichi asked. That seemed like the easiest way out of all of it.

"No! Then it would all be over!" Monika exclaimed.

She was more resistant to the idea than he'd expected. If she wasn't going to throw it away, even in a situation like this, then it was something she felt was worth risking her life for.

"Got it," Yuichi said. "Anyway, can you let me have it? If the worst happens, we can split up and I can draw him after me."

"Sure. Take it." Monika obediently handed over the eyeball.

"Are you sure you're okay with this? It's important to you, isn't it?" Yuichi asked.

"Yeah," Monika said. "I trust you. You could have just abandoned me, but you've already carried me this far."

Yuichi felt a little bashful, having her say it straight out like that.

"So is there some way to use it? I can tell where he is too with this, right?" Yuichi peered at the eyeball she had given him. She had said that they were resonating, but it didn't seem to be doing anything special to him.

"It's already in use, so no," she said. "Each Divine Vessel takes a host in someone's body. Once it's assigned to someone, it can't be used by anyone else."

"So right now, it's a one-way street?" Yuichi knitted his brow. That put them at a significant disadvantage.

"If you kill the person it's assigned to, it reverts to its original state and you can use it again," she said. "But I don't want to do that... and collecting them should be enough, even if you can't use their power."

Yuichi could sympathize with that. He had just been thinking that if the battle for the Divine Vessels was going to involve killing people, he was going to say he couldn't help her.

“How long does the resonance last for?” he asked.

“Until the Evil God is satisfied... I guess. I think the resonance will stop once things feel like they’ve reached a turning point...”

“That’s pretty vague,” he said.

Monika hesitated. “This is a story called ‘Battle for the Divine Vessels,’ so there should be some kind of decisive event to start and end the resonance, but...”

“I guess it’s too much to hope that someone else somewhere will reach this ‘turning point’ for us, huh?”

“But what good does that do us? It just means we have to keep running until the resonance stops...” Monika’s voice dropped, perhaps imagining an eternal road of desperate flight stretching out before her, never knowing when or if the resonance would stop.

Yuichi realized they weren’t going to make any progress like this. He would just have to finish things here, in these alleyways.

“Let me ask something else,” he began. “What do you know about him?”

“You’re going to fight him?!” Monika exclaimed.

“We might as well get it over with,” he said. “We can’t just keep running, right? So tell me what you know. Anything could be useful, even if it’s not combat-related.” Fortunately, there were no people here. No matter how recklessly the man acted, casualties would remain at a minimum.

Monika didn’t sound happy about it, but nevertheless, she began to murmur. “...First of all, he isn’t human. Immortality is his natural state. He’s a yokai of unknown origin. He eats human souls and stocks up lives by doing that.”

“I saw a number with Soul Reader,” Yuichi said. “Does it have to do with that?”

It had said Immortal (9). That number could refer to his “stock” of lives.

“Probably,” Monika said. “He won’t die until his lives run out. And he’s really, really strong, so the idea of killing him even once seems pretty doubtful. Also, the Evil God’s Left Eye lets him see the future. Well? Still want to fight him?” Monika asked sarcastically.

He did sound like a tough opponent. “What’s the deal with his future sight?” Yuichi asked.

“It’s just what it sounds like,” Monika said. “He knows everything you’re going to do, which makes him the perfect opponent for an Outer. Outers are ‘lucky,’ you could say. But future sight makes luck irrelevant, right? That’s why we call him a god-killer.”

“But his attacks didn’t hit, did they?” Yuichi asked. He’d thrown several things at them, but Yuichi had dodged them all.

“He can only use it when it’s one-on-one. He can only see one

person's future, so when there's more than one person there, the results get less predictable. If it had just been me, I'd be dead right now."

"Immortal, super strong, and can see the future, huh?" Yuichi said. "I guess I'll just have to deal with those things one at a time."

Yuichi started walking, showing little concern for Monika's warnings.

"What are you gonna do?" Monika asked, looking suspicious about Yuichi's attitude.

"Well, it's a little wider over there, so—" As he started walking, Yuichi realized he was saying something strange.

What? Have I seen this place before?

The surroundings didn't look familiar. Yet Yuichi knew them. And he knew that if he turned left up ahead, he'd come to a more open area; there would be a staircase leading to a basement there, to the entrance to a run-down old cafe.

Yuichi ran forward to confirm it. As he turned the corner, he saw just the sight he imagined.

A dead end, a staircase, the entrance to a cafe. He was sure he hadn't been here before, and yet, he knew this place.

Yuichi turned around and looked at Monika, who had followed him. He felt like the sight he had seen before had included Monika, as well.

"Have we been here before?" Yuichi asked.

"Yeah," she said. "But could we talk about that later? Now's not really ideal..."

"Good point. Anyway, go hide at the bottom of the stairs." Yuichi walked further in, to stand before the stairs that led to the cafe. Then he turned back to the entrance to the alley.

The sun would be low on the horizon by now, but the area around him seemed better lit than he expected. There was light pouring in from the windows of the strange old shops around them.

Monika had descended the staircase as Yuichi had asked, poking her head over the side to watch.

The footsteps drew closer. At last, the man appeared at the entrance to the cul-de-sac.

"Immortal (13)," the label read. The number was higher now. He must have been eating the souls of those he'd killed on his way there. His wounds seemed to have healed over completely, as well. His regeneration wasn't instantaneous, but it was fast, nevertheless.

Yuichi partitioned out a corner of his mind to begin churning over ways to deal with each of his abilities.

"I guess we're not gonna be able to talk about this, are we?" Yuichi asked, without much hope.

“Naw, that’s not true...” The man spoke for the first time. His voice was heavy and low, but there was significant irritation mixed in with it. “You can cry, scream, piss yourself, and beg for your life! What I don’t wanna see is you putting on airs!” the man roared.

“Yeah, talking’s not gonna work here...” Yuichi mumbled.

In other words, the giant was a brawn-over-brains hooligan. Deciding it was pointless to say anything more, Yuichi prepared to fight.

The man glared at Yuichi, his eyes burning with rage. He was about to charge forward, but then suddenly, he stopped.

Yuichi stared.

This was an unexpected development. There was no reason for him to stop.

The man coughed up something sticky and red.

“Huh?”

There was something sticking out of the man’s chest. The tip was sharp and metal, and stained with blood. It took Yuichi a moment to realize that it was the point of a sword.

“You know that finding enemies through the resonance applies to all of us,” said a voice from behind the man. “You really let your guard down.”

The man with a sword through his heart pitched forward, revealing a girl of high school age.

She was dressed in a breezy summer outfit of a camisole and shorts. It was only her right arm, extended in front of her, that ruined the look. It was wrapped in something black and twisted, and in her hand was a blood-stained sword, which itself was wreathed in black flames.

Above her head was the word “Hero.” Yuichi had seen a lot of labels in his time, but this one was the most suspicious one yet.

The fallen man lay still. He was definitely dead. The fact that the label above his head had disappeared was unquestionable proof.

“Didn’t you say he was immortal? And who’s she?” he asked Monika while keeping his eyes locked on the girl standing in front of him.

“H-How should I know?” Monika sounded just as confused as he was about the situation.

Reinforcements? Is she taking part in the war, too? What’s going on, here? Yuichi’s mind was full of questions, but no answers seemed forthcoming.

Yuichi gazed at the girl.

The girl gazed back at Yuichi.

“Huh? Hey, aren’t you Sakaki? What are you doing here?” the girl asked.

It was almost as if she knew him.

“Have we met?” Yuichi asked, his guard fully up. This girl was not normal if she had no compunctions about killing someone.

Of course, Yuichi was in no position to talk. He had felt a slight shock at seeing someone die in front of his eyes, but no more than that. Perhaps it was Mutsuko’s training that had taught him to remain calm in situations like these, but he still felt a bit of self-loathing for it.

“We pass each other in the halls at school, that’s all,” the girl said. “But you’re famous, so pretty much everybody knows you.”

“I don’t know remember doing anything that would make me stand out…” Ever since discovering Soul Reader, Yuichi had tried hard to stay under the radar. The only thing he could think of was being known as his sister’s little brother.

“Huh? All the girls in our class think you’re super hot, though,” the girl said. As she spoke, she passed the sword from her right hand to her left. The darkness that wreathed it stretched from hand to blade with an almost viscous quality, before finally dissipating as the change-off completed. Now held in her left hand, the blade’s menacing sharpness had completely vanished. It just looked like a plastic toy, which the girl stuck into her belt with a flourish.

She then began approaching him casually, but Yuichi raised a hand.

“Stop.”

“Huh? Are you afraid of me, or something?” The girl stopped and looked at him in confusion. “Come on, it’s okay. He was a bad guy. I’m a good guy.” The girl pointed at the man behind her and then at herself, with a blank smile, as if that explained everything. “So no worries, okay?”

“He’s a bad guy, so you killed him? Some hero…” Yuichi said, sarcastically.

“Ha, you mean a hero-with-a-demon-in-her-right-arm kind of thing?” the girl said, as if she rather liked the idea. She seemed entirely unaware of her “Hero” label. “I like it. Fallen heroes are pretty cool.”

“Yuichi! Watch out for her right arm!” Monika exclaimed.

“Yeah, I know,” Yuichi responded curtly to the warning. The girl had mentioned something about resonance, so she was clearly part of the Divine Vessels War. The situation was getting more and more confusing.

“I don’t know why you have the Evil God’s eye, Sakaki, but you don’t seem to be its host, so I can take it easy on you,” the girl said. “Just give it to me, and I’ll let you go.”

“Sorry,” Yuichi said. “This was entrusted to me. I can’t just hand it over.”

He cast a glance behind him. Monika was looking nervous.

"Hmm, that's a problem... I don't want to kill you if I can avoid it. But in the name of justice—" Before she could finish, the girl abruptly disappeared.

That was what any normal person would think, at least. But Yuichi saw what really happened. The fallen man had suddenly sat up, raised a meaty fist, and slammed her to the side. The girl's light body had flown like a ragdoll, then crashed into the side of a building nearby.

"Dammit!" Yuichi had been too far away; he couldn't go to help her.

He had underestimated the "Immortal" label.

The man's heart had been penetrated. He had definitely been dead. Mutsuko had beaten warnings about opponents playing possum into his head over and over again, so Yuichi knew what to look for, and there was no question. But it was that certainty that had caused him to let his guard down.

"Ah, dammit! You made me lose one!" the man spat, looking down at the fallen girl. The number above his head now read "12."

"Is that what 'Immortal' meant?" Yuichi asked.

There was a hole in the man's clothing, but no wound in his chest. It had all healed over in an instant.

In other words, killing him heals all of his wounds right away, and restores him to normal, Yuichi thought. He didn't get the logic of it, but that was the reality. He'd have to accept it.

The man raised a foot to step on the collapsed girl.

She quickly rolled over and swung outwards with her black flame-wreathed right arm, launching a rock out from that hand. She must have grabbed it when she'd fallen. It turned into a bullet of light as it flew at him.

A surprise attack. It would normally be impossible to dodge, given the timing with which the man was trying to step on her. But the man just brought his leg down and dodged it effortlessly.

Then he lifted his leg again, and mercilessly crushed the girl's head beneath it. There was an unsettling bone-crunching sound, and a copious outpouring of blood. It was clear that there was no saving her.

"Surprise attacks won't work as long as I can see you," the man said. He seemed to be addressing to the dead girl, but he was probably actually saying it to invoke despair in Yuichi.

He was referring to his future vision. That was how his magical sight worked.

That was the foundation behind everything he did.

There was no benefit in his telling Yuichi about it, but he seemed to have absolute confidence that the information wouldn't change

what was to come. Just knowing that someone had future vision wouldn't help you deal with it.

"Sorry for the wait," the man said. "It's finally your turn." He cast a vicious smile at Yuichi, then took a step forward.

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He was lucky, the man thought. He could get two Divine Vessels in one fell swoop, with very little sacrifice on his end.

The right arm possessed by the girl had the power to enhance weapons and armor, it seemed. A combat power. That suited him.

He didn't know the power of the Divine Vessel the boy had, but if it was an eye, he wouldn't need to let it find host in him. He already had the best eye.

The preview eye, as he thought of it. It showed him what was going to happen a few seconds into the future, played as a faint overlay over his vision of the present.

The man approached the boy, intending to lash out with a high kick. As he did, he saw a vision of the boy raising his right arm beside his face to block. When he thought about punching instead of kicking, this time, he saw a vision of the boy raising his hand in front of his face.

He knew what his opponent would do in advance. No one could deny that that gave him an advantage in battle.

He had acquired magical sight, on top of the super strength and immortality he had been born with. The man had perfect confidence in what he could do in a fight. No matter what happened, there was no way that he could lose. He had never lost to a supernatural being before, let alone a mere human.

The man saw himself as a monster to transcend all monsters. If he felt anything towards the boy, it was pity that he should be born such a weakling by comparison. Of course, that was no reason to hold back. He would stomp on the ant, and be grateful that he was not born an ant himself.

The man was annoyed.

Just because he was a little faster, the boy had run all around, arrogantly thinking he could lose him. He was sure it was also this brat's fault that he had been taken by surprise after cornering him.

He wouldn't let his guard down again. There was no sign of another Divine Vessel bearer in the area, but now they'd know he was here. He'd have to finish things here quickly, then get moving again.

He looked a few seconds into the future, and saw that the boy had no intention of moving. He was apparently going to stand there until the man approached him.

The man held up his right arm, and pulled his fist back to his ear.

A clearly telegraphed punching stance, but the man didn't care. He knew in advance whether the punch would land or not, so no matter how he obvious he made it, he could see that it would surely hit.

The man would launch out with his fist. The boy would try to block it in front of his face. All the man could see was how his opponent would act; he couldn't tell how far the boy would go flying after he was hit.

But he didn't need future sight to know that his strike's power would snap the boy's thin arm, collapse his nose and face, and leave him a ragged heap on the pavement.

Satisfied, the man threw his fist forward.

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Yuichi grabbed the man's fist just before it hit his face.

Without moving a step from where he was, he caught the fist with only his outstretched left hand.

Yuichi was annoyed.

There had been the attack with the truck, the people he had killed in town, and the indifferent way with which he had crushed that girl's head. The man's arrogance was intolerable.

That was why he decided to meet him head-on.

Match strength against strength, speed against speed, skill against skill. That was what Mutsuko had taught him.

Using skill to deal with strength was something Mutsuko thought was narrow-minded, and her way of thinking fit the competitive Yuichi perfectly.

The man froze up, agape, as if not quite sure what was going on. He was wide open. But Yuichi waited for the man to move.

The first thing the man tried to do was pull back his caught fist, so Yuichi began crushing it with his own finely honed grip strength.

The man's face contorted in agony as his right fist was crushed. He unleashed a sort of hook with his left.

Yuichi closed in, stepped on the man's left foot, caught his left knee between both of his own, struck his jaw with his palm, and launched his elbow into the man's solar plexus. It all happened almost simultaneously; the man couldn't even process what was happening. He was confused by the various pains that were suddenly coursing through his body.

As the man's right fist healed, he launched out with another strike.

Yuichi arrested the hand down at his side, broke the man's right elbow, then let out a strike of his own to break his nose. At the same time, he aimed a kick at the man's crotch.

If this man could see the future, as he claimed, then right now he

must be witnessing his own helpless defeat.

Out of all this man's abilities, Yuichi had realized his future sight was not the one to be worried about. Even Yuichi could do what he did; predicting his opponent's actions was something he did all the time.

In Chinese martial arts, it was known as "ting jin" — listening energy — the ability to detect your opponent's movements before they came. To feel shifts in balance and tensing of muscle instinctively... it was, effectively, a form of future sight.

"Damn you!" the man screamed.

Even with his entire body broken, he stood up again. He was spitting out curses, his face contorted in confusion, and didn't even seem to have thought about what he would do after he got up.

His twisted arm, broken ribs, and snapped jaw were all slowly recovering, but Yuichi decided this low level of regeneration wouldn't help him. He had fought Aiko's brother Kyoya; the man would need to regenerate at least that quickly to be any threat to him.

The man's eyes had begun to flicker with uncertainty. His perfect confidence from before was starting to waver. Yet he chose to keep fighting. With a roar, he threw himself at Yuichi.

A body blow. Simple as it was, merely throwing his entire weight on someone would surely be effective.

But Yuichi approached him without flinching, and snapped a foot into the man's knee the instant his weight shifted to that leg. In Chinese martial arts, it was known as a fujin kick, and it smashed the man's kneecap effortlessly. As the man came toppling towards him, Yuichi met him with his elbow, then struck the man's jaw from the side, dislodging it.

Yuichi didn't care that the man couldn't die. He hadn't intended to kill him from the start, so if he wouldn't die, that just made things easier.

But that didn't mean he couldn't put him in pain.

In this short time, Yuichi had been learning what kinds of injuries would confound the man's regeneration the most. Complex bone fractures wouldn't heal very quickly, and severance of muscle tissue was debilitating if he struck the same place multiple times. Attacks to his meridians were also effective.

If he died, he'd heal instantly, so Yuichi just had to not kill him. But the man was completely at his mercy; with all four limbs smashed, he couldn't even crawl away.

The man's jaw was a mushy, immobile pulp after being broken so many times. It hadn't been Yuichi's intention, but in doing so, he had managed to prevent the man from biting his tongue to kill himself.

Finally, as if to finish off the fallen man, Yuichi kicked him in the head hard enough to jostle his brainpan. Even with his regenerative powers, that should render him inert for a while.

"I know a super doctor. I'll introduce you to him," Yuichi murmured, as if making an excuse. He was starting to think maybe he'd gone a little too far.

"Yuichi... just who are you? I knew you were pretty strong, but..." Monika walked over to him, staring dumbfounded at what he'd done.

"I'm no one special," said Yuichi. "Just a high school student unlucky enough to have started getting used to things like this. So what do we do now? I knocked him out, but..."

Yuichi looked down at the man whose arms and legs were shattered and whose jaw was broken. It was a pain knowing that he'd revive if he died, but Yuichi was confident that he'd only half-killed him. He could tell from instinct that he had life left in him.

Monika crouched down and picked up something round that had fallen near the man's face. It looked just like the Divine Vessel that

Yuichi was carrying. The Evil God's Left Eye, most likely.

Yuichi peered into the man's face curiously. He had a left eye. Even losing the Divine Vessel didn't make him lose the possessed feature, it seemed.

"How does it work?" Yuichi asked.

"Once things reach a turning point, the Divine Vessels move," said Monika. "I don't know exactly how they define 'turning point,' though. Most people try to kill each other, since they assume that would cover it, but..."

"So, is it possible my Soul Reader comes from one of those Divine Vessels?" Yuichi asked. The way the giant had acquired his magic sight felt a lot like Yuichi's current situation, and it would explain why she wanted it back if she was gathering the Vessels.

"Soul Reader is different," said Monika. "That's a basic Outer ability. I knew about this man because I saw his info with Soul Reader."

"You know a whole lot, though," Yuichi said. "Soul Reader doesn't tell you that much, does it? It just gives you words above a person's head."

"It shows that person's role in their worldview and a short history and stuff," Monika said. "It lets you identify important key items to a worldview, too. So it's necessary for searching for Divine Vessels... is your Soul Reader atrophied or something?"

"'Atrophied' is a pretty ugly term for it." Yuichi replied, feeling ruffled, then spoke quickly. "So why *can* I use Soul Reader? You changed the subject earlier, but is there something I forgot? Please tell me, if so." Now that things were calmed down, he was brimming over with questions.

"Allow me to explain about that!" a high-pitched voice rang out abruptly, breaking into their conversation.

The voice had come from Monika's shoulder. A spongy, round, white creature — it looked a bit like a daifuku mochi with eyes and a mouth — was speaking to him.

"...Hey. Is this a test of how much weird stuff I can accept at once?" Yuichi asked. He was starting to wish he could just slam the brakes on this nonstop parade of the bizarre.

"Um... this is one of my powers, too. It doesn't really have a name. It's sort of like the debt I owe you given form..." Monika said with an uncomfortable expression.

"That's right," the spongy white creature said. "I am an embodiment of the debt Monika owes you. I wanted to let you know that Monika is the one who caused you to lose your memory of meeting her the first time. Monika has an ability called 'Distant Memories' that erases people's memory of an event. She tried to use

that to erase her obligation for the great debt she owed you!"

Yuichi shot a glare at Monika, who averted her eyes guiltily.

"And I'm very sorry to say this, but once she's employed that ability, not even she can undo it," the creature added. "Its purpose is to create developments where people forget the promises they made long ago in their childhood, only for the memory to return at a properly dramatic time. So the details of the matter will have to wait until after you regain your memory."

"Can't you just tell me what I've forgotten?" Yuichi asked.

"No, neither she nor I can tell you what you've forgotten. You see, it all started when @%@%$%$$&@@@$*%... and you didn't understand a word of that, did you?"

It felt like the thing had been speaking in a foreign language. In other words, he had no idea what it had just said.

"Fine," Yuichi said. "Forget the explanation; just take Soul Reader and go."

"Then give it back!" Monika cried.

"...How?"

"How should I know?!"

"...Wait a minute... what the heck is going on here?" Yuichi felt a headache coming on. "You're the one who gave me Soul Reader, aren't you? I don't understand!"

"More precisely, you took it as part of the debt she owed," the daifuku offered helpfully.

"You gave it to me, so you should take it back!" Yuichi cried. "Why would I know how to give it back?"

"Actually, I am the one who gave Soul Reader to you, Yuichi. But while I can bestow it, I cannot return it!" the daifuku said, with inexplicable pride in its voice.

"Don't tell me to give it back if you don't know how I'm supposed to do it!" Yuichi's temper hadn't reached the level of anger yet, but there was a lot about this that was grating on his nerves.

"W-Well, anyway!" Monika said, changing the subject. "I feel sorry for the girl who came out here and got herself killed, but we should take the Divine Vessel on her right arm... huh?" As if only just remembering the existence of the other Divine Vessel, Monika turned to head for the dead girl by the wall. But suddenly, she stopped.

Yuichi immediately realized what had taken Monika by surprise.

The girl's body was gone.

The girl who had crashed into the wall, fallen on the ground, and then had her head stomped on, was now nowhere to be seen. The area where she had been was pristine, with no sign of the pool of blood that had formed around her earlier.

"Does this have something to do with the Divine Vessels, too?"

Yuichi asked.

"I don't think so," Monika said. "But Divine Vessels are often given to people with great strength or special abilities, so maybe she had some innate power of her own that saved her..."

The girl had seemed to know Yuichi, but he didn't even know her name. He had no way of finding out if she was dead or alive. To be frank, he couldn't be sure she had ever really existed.

"Anyway, we shouldn't stay here much longer, I guess," Yuichi said. "Even if the resonance has stopped, they'll know that this was the last place we were."

Leaving the unconscious man where he was, Yuichi and Monika quickly went back on the move.

They met back up with Aiko and Nero, and for a while after that, everything was normal.

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"That story took too long!" Tomomi complained.

"You're the one who wanted to hear it!" Yuichi shot back, outraged.

They were in the Chinese restaurant Nihao the China, where Yuichi and his companions had gathered.

Yuichi was explaining what had happened over his summer vacation.

"Couldn't you have just summarized it?" Tomomi asked.

"Oh, come on..."

"Well, I feel like I understand what happened now, so we can save the details for another time," Tomomi added.

Her criticism made Yuichi wonder if he really had been telling it wrong. He felt a little frustrated.

"Anyway, you're all participating in the Divine Vessel War, right?" Tomomi asked. "Monika wants to gather the Divine Vessels and wish to become human again, but you need Soul Reader to search for Divine Vessels, and since neither of you knows how to give it back, you've asked Sakaki for his help. And Sakaki's such a soft touch, he's helping you out despite not really understanding the situation."

"Hamasaki, you know about the Evil God and the Divine Vessels?" Yuichi asked.

They called it an Evil God, but apparently Monika didn't actually know if it was really evil, or a god. Whatever it was, she'd told Yuichi, its body had been cut up into many small parts, and anyone who collected them all could have a wish granted.

"Yeah," Tomomi said. "I'd heard rumors that someone was trying to resurrect the Evil God in this city. Now, I know about Aiko and Sakaki's little sister, but who's the blond over there?" Tomomi pointed

to Ibaraki, who was reclining in his chair with a superior attitude.

"He's an oni," Yuichi said. "He's looking after Monika right now. There's a chance the Divine Vessels could start resonating out of the blue and she could get ambushed, after all. Since we can't tell when they resonate, we need to be on our guard at all times."

"Yeah, it was a real surprise that he asked me," Ibaraki said. "Knowing Yuichi, I thought he'd be more like, 'Ambushes? Yeah, bring it on!'"

"What kind of person do you think I am?" Yuichi asked, feeling slightly hurt.

"Okay, so I know all the members of your party," Tomomi said. "Now, what are you doing here at my restaurant?"

"It's an information meeting about Evil God stuff, obviously," said Monika. "Everyone, make your reports!"

The disembodied parts of the Evil God were known as Divine Vessels. They resonated from time to time, which made it possible to know the locations of other Divine Vessels. But you could only sense the resonance if a Vessel had taken you as a host.

The Vessels in Monika's possession already had hosts somewhere else, which meant she couldn't feel them resonating. Instead, she had asked Yuichi and the others to be on the lookout for suspicious people who seemed like they might have Vessels.

But nobody responded to Monika's call.

"Wait a minute! No one has *anything*?!" Monika acted surprised, but Yuichi found it only natural.

"Well, how are we even supposed to tell?" Ibaraki complained. "You told us to look for suspicious people, but everyone's suspicious in our business, y'know? I mean, I did keep an eye out for extra-suspicious people..." He trailed off with a sigh.

"Monika never thinks these things through..." Yoriko joined in with a sigh of her own.

"Actually, there's someone suspicious at our school I was thinking of mentioning," said Yuichi. "She's a teacher named Makina Shikitani."

"Wait a minute! What's she doing there?" Monika asked, having an immediate reaction to the name.

"She said the guy who crashed the truck into the cafe was working for her," said Yuichi. "What do you think it means?"

Makina had appeared abruptly as a teacher at Seishin High. It seemed to Yuichi that she must be involved with the Divine Vessels business somehow.

"He only had one Divine Vessel, so he's probably out of the fight, but..." Monika frowned.

"The new teacher, Shikitani? She's a substitute, right? Does she

really have a connection to the Divine Vessels?" Tomomi asked dubiously.

"She's an Outer," Yuichi said. "She seems to have some kind of plan for the school. I don't know if it's connected to the Divine Vessels, but... be careful around her, okay, Hamasaki?"

"But can Outers even use Divine Vessels?" Tomomi asked. "I thought event items like those were off limits for them."

Yuichi had been told that Outers existed outside of destiny — outside of stories. Even if they could influence events in destiny, they themselves couldn't get directly involved. That should mean that they couldn't become hosts for Divine Vessels. At least, that was what Tomomi seemed to be thinking.

"Yeah, so she must have a proxy she's acting through," Monika said. "Outers often get involved in stories in 'helper' roles."

"Then if we defeated her proxy and recovered the Divine Vessel, would it be safe to assume she's not involved anymore?" Yuichi asked. There was a chance she might get a new one, of course, but if they started down that road, there would be no end to it.

"Even if she's not connected to the Divine Vessels, you should still watch out for Makina! She's gotta be plotting something bad!" Monika said, as if trying to keep Yuichi from getting too optimistic.

"She made it pretty clear that she's a bad person, yeah..." Yuichi grimaced as he remembered the way Makina seemed to like toying with people.

"Yuichi. I think you're probably underestimating her," Monika said. "Outers are garbage people who view everyone else as disposable characters in stories, but she's especially dangerous."

"Yeah, she locked me up, which was pretty rough," Yuichi responded lightly. She did seem like an inherently cruel person, but it was hard to imagine she could be that much of a threat. If he ever had to fight her, he could probably win, so it wouldn't be hard to just force her out of their lives if things ever got desperate.

"Huh? She did what?! I'm surprised you made it out alive!" Monika exclaimed. "Listen, the world she comes from is 'A World of Brooding Isolation.' Put simply, it's a death game thriller world. She locks people away and forces them into extreme situations to kill them!"

"Really? She didn't seem like she'd go that far to me..." Yuichi thought back, and she hadn't seemed particularly bloodthirsty.

"The goal of most Outers isn't to kill," Monika said. "They usually just want to play around with the stories. But she's different. When she gets involved, people always die. Most of the time, *everyone involved* dies, except once in a while, when a single 'protagonist' gets to survive!"

If that was the case, then she really had taken it easy on Yuichi. There had been no death condition in the game Makina had set up for him.

“But all she can do is lock you in,” Yuichi said. “She can’t force people to kill each other.”

All she’d done was to make it impossible for him to leave the room. If he’d been stuck in there for a really long time, maybe it would have come to that, but most people wouldn’t get that desperate that quickly.

“I told you before that Worldview Holders known as Outers have abilities that let them to impose their worldviews on others, right?” Monika asked. “Her ability is ‘Sealed Room Game.’ She can impose rules on the people she locks up in her rooms.”

“How much can those rules make you do, though?” Yuichi asked. “I don’t think she did anything to me.”

Yuichi had been locked inside the student guidance room and made to play her game, but he didn’t remember feeling any sort of compulsion.

“It’s kind of like an irresistible hypnosis, I guess,” Monika said. “All sentient life inside the closed space must follow the rules. In extreme situations, it can even be things like, ‘If you move, you die.’”

“Then what can you even do against her?” Yuichi demanded. If she could make up rules like that, she could do literally anything.

“Well, she does them so she can enjoy the ‘game,’” Monika responded, “I doubt she’d find ‘if you move, you die’ very much fun. But it does basically leave you subject to her whims.”

“Which means if you get sealed inside, it’s over. What if you try to destroy the room?” Yuichi asked.

If the ability could only be used in a closed space, it seemed to Yuichi, destroying the room would be your best option to break out.

“Not possible,” said Monika. “She has another ability called ‘Inviolable Domain.’ It’s a protective field she uses to keep items necessary to the game from being destroyed, which includes the enclosed space, as well as herself. In other words, when she’s in her own world, she’s invincible.”

“That’s crazy...” Yuichi was stunned. If that was true, then there was no way to deal with Makina but to play along with her games.

“I told you she was dangerous! You have to be really careful! As long as you remain on your guard, you can probably avoid getting stuck in her closed spaces.” Monika’s tone was extremely serious.

“Of course, just because she’s invincible doesn’t mean there’s no way to deal with her,” Tomomi chimed in. “I mean, it stands to reason, right? If people like her could just do whatever they wanted, the world would be in chaos.”

“That may be true, but then how do you deal with her?” Monika asked.

“There are limitations that keep an Outer’s abilities from being too overpowered,” said Tomomi. “They’re more like objections than anything else, really, but what it comes down to is that they can’t activate their effects within a story without fulfilling certain restrictions. It’s what keeps them from using their abilities limitlessly.”

“So… Tomomi, was it? I don’t know Makina’s restrictions. Do you?” Monika stared at her intently.

“Of course not.” Tomomi brushed the question off.

“Actually… she mentioned something about that,” Yuichi said. “That she couldn’t use the ability in closed spaces she made herself, and she had to be inside them.” The word “restrictions” had triggered a memory; he was pretty sure Makina had mentioned something like that.

“That sounds about right,” Tomomi mused. “But if those are the only restrictions, it’s still unbalanced. There must be more to it.”

She was probably right. Still, they had no way of knowing what else there might be, which meant they had to stay on their guard about Makina.

Yuichi would take Monika’s warning to heart.

Chapter 5: Dating My Club Senior (With Little Sister and Classmate Monitoring)

At first, Kanako just read books to pass the time.

She did it on the way to and from school, and she would stay in the library until dinnertime. As long as she said was studying, her mother wouldn't stop her.

She chose the library as her refuge because no one would find it strange for an elementary school student to spend long hours there.

She spent her time in idleness, pretending to read books, wiling away hours she would otherwise have to spend with her mother. Anyone who saw her would just think she was a regular bookworm.

Then one day, a voice abruptly interrupted her routine. "You haven't read any of it, have you?"

Kanako glanced up from the book, and looked beside her. There was a beautiful woman in glasses sitting there.

She wasn't sure how to react to being addressed by a total stranger like this, and she was shocked to have been seen through in such a manner.

It was quiet. The library was always quiet, but it was even quieter now than it usually was. She realized that she and the woman were the only ones in the small room.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"A book-loving sorceress."

"Are you making fun of me?" Kanako asked indignantly. Even if she was just a child, she wasn't going to fall for something like that.

"If you want me to prove it, I will," the woman said. "If I show you a spell, will you believe me, then? ...Ah, I know. You won't be able to see out the windows. Instead, you'll see a view into another world. How about that?" The woman pointed to the window.

Kanako froze.

The sight that hung before her eyes was unlike anything she could ever have imagined.

The library was not well-lit even at noon, but now, it was illuminated by blinding sunlight. A blue sky spread out wide above.

In it, an enormous dragon and bird were locked in battle. The dragon won, but just as it was about to fly off with the bird in its talons, an enormous fish jumped up from below and gobbled them both whole.

When she looked more carefully, she could see all kinds of things in that sky. Winged horses and women with wings for arms. Witches on brooms and knights on flying carpets, all going this way and that.

Kanako drew closer to the window.

"You cannot open the windows," the woman said. "But you'll have no trouble seeing what's out there. Look all you like."

Kanako looked down below.

A sea as red as blood spread out before her. The fish that had swallowed the dragon landed with a big splash.

She looked to the horizon and saw that it was curved. If this world was a sphere, then the planet must be much smaller than Earth.

Kanako looked up above.

She saw three round moons, red, black, and white, each moving in strange ways. The red throbbed, the black trembled, and the white seemed to spin. Then, as they all turned towards her, she realized that they were eyes.

It gave Kanako a jolt.

She realized that something else had entered her line of vision while she was looking up at the sky.

It was a castle, beautiful, white, and sparkling. It was floating atop an enormous island.

"Do you believe I'm a sorceress now?" the woman asked.

Kanako listened distantly to the words as she looked out the window, trying various angles. It was true that she couldn't open the window, but it was clearly more than a simple image projected onto it.

It was really there. Kanako was convinced.

"Yeah... but why...?" Kanako came back and sat down next to the woman.

It was clear that she had some sort of mysterious power, yet Kanako didn't find it frightening.

If this sorceress had come to her, then surely, she had come to take Kanako somewhere. To the world outside the window, perhaps? While Kanako turned over the woman's potential intentions over and over in her mind, the woman set a book down on the desk. It was just an ordinary novel for children, though it came in a box with rather extravagant binding.

A book given to her by a sorceress. It could be something terrible, but Kanako's reaction was not fear, but disappointment.

"I want you to read this," the woman said. "Hmm? You seem to be disappointed... were you expecting something better?"

"No, but..." Kanako said. She had apparently been unable to conceal her disappointment.

"I had a feeling you were only pretending to read books," the

woman said. “So I wanted to teach you the joy of reading by offering you one of my favorites.”

“But even if you leave it there, I might not read it.” Kanako said sulkily.

“Then I suppose that’s what you’ll do. If I forced you to read it, it would defeat the point.” The woman stood up and left the room.

Kanako remained behind, still confused about everything.

The minute the woman left, the sunlight dimmed abruptly. When Kanako looked outside, all she could see was the dingy wall of the next building over. Then, to complete the return to normalcy, people appeared again.

It was almost like a daydream. But the sorceress had definitely been there. The book she had left behind was proof.

Unable to simply ignore all of that, Kanako decided to start reading the book.

It was a fantasy, the story of a young child brought to our world from another as a changeling, who eventually returned to the original world and had an adventure there. Kanako soon found herself engrossed in the book.

The protagonist’s circumstances matched Kanako’s own.

For a long time, she’d held a vague feeling that not everything was the way it was supposed to be. Maybe all children in circumstances like Kanako’s felt that way: *Was I found somewhere? Did someone take me in?*

An idea entered Kanako’s mind. Was the sorceress trying to tell her that she was not a native of this world?

Why would a sorceress appear out of nowhere and give her a book? There must be a reason. She must have come here with some special purpose.

Gradually, that appealing daydream took over Kanako’s mind. She had real parents out there somewhere. If only she could get to them, her life would be happy. Someday, maybe, they would come to get her.

Most people would find that a foolish idea. But Kanako knew that magic existed. She had seen another world — an isekai — with her own eyes.

Kanako lost herself in reading, and escaping into that daydream carried her through her elementary school years. She read piles of these “isekai” stories, dreamed of going to an isekai, and eventually started thinking about writing a story of her own. And now, in present day, having achieved her dream of becoming a writer...

...Kanako was a slave to a deadline.

*****

It was a Sunday in early September, a little before noon, at the station building.

In the middle of the station's concourse was a meeting spot known as the Carillon Bell. Aiko was there, but she wasn't at the bell. She was hiding behind a nearby pillar, watching.

Her attention was focused on Yuichi. He was wearing a light jacket and jeans combo, which she had seen him in before, and he was just standing under the bell, not doing anything in particular.

What a way to spend my day off... Aiko thought.

Yuichi was going out on the town with Kanako today, and she couldn't stop thinking about it. She'd spent the whole morning fidgeting, until the next thing she knew, she was here.

"Noro."

"Eek!" The sudden voice behind her caused Aiko to jump.

"Please, keep it down," the voice chided her. It was a girl, wearing a hat pulled low over her face. She was dressed casually, in a T-shirt and jeans. It was possibly supposed to help her blend in, but it couldn't hide the fact that she was a beautiful young girl.

"Huh? Yoriko?" Aiko asked.

It was indeed Yuichi's little sister, Yoriko Sakaki, and her exasperation with Aiko was palpable. "What, exactly, are you doing here?" she asked.

"The same thing as you, probably!" Aiko said indignantly. The surprise had annoyed the already-aggravated Aiko.

"Well, yes, but you aren't very well hidden, you know," said Yoriko. "I spotted you right away."

"I-I wasn't trying to hide!" It was true she was trying to blend in, but she wasn't trying to hide, or follow him, or anything like that... Although, now that Aiko thought about it, she wasn't entirely sure *what* she was trying to do.

"But Orihara, eh?" Yoriko asked. "I never expected this development. I thought she had no interest in my brother..."

Yoriko had met Kanako for the first time during their summer training camp, so she must have made that determination then.

"Yeah, I thought the same thing..." Aiko murmured. Kanako usually referred to Yuichi as "Sakaki the Younger," so Aiko had assumed she only thought of him as Mutsuko's kid brother.

"Research for a story, perhaps?" Yoriko asked. "No... if that was all she was doing, she wouldn't have to drag my brother along! She could have asked Big Sis or you!"

"I'm not sure I'd go along if she asked me, though..." said Aiko. "Hey, why don't we meet up with them? They're not necessarily on a date, right? And we probably wouldn't get in the way of her research."

“Oh, it’s *clearly* a date,” said Yoriko. “And I make it a policy not to interrupt dates. I would hate having someone get in the way of mine, after all.”

“That’s a surprise. I thought you’d be happy to get in their way.”

“Noro, who do you think I am, exactly?” Yoriko looked a little bit angry.

“You were very aggressive when it came to mine...” Aiko was thinking of the time she had gone out with Yuichi to buy a thank-you gift for Yoriko. Yoriko had clung to her brother quite a lot on that day.

“Because he agreed to go out with me first!” Yoriko exclaimed. “You’re the one who got in *my* way! Oh, but thank you for the gift. I really appreciated it.” It was moments of surprising politeness like these that made Aiko feel that Yoriko wasn’t a bad girl.

Aiko said, “Well, as for who I think you are, I think you’re a little sister with a complex, who loves her big brother very much.”

“It’s a bit annoying to have it summed up that way, but I can’t deny that you’re more or less right,” said Yoriko. “I won’t deny that I used to aggressively block women who showed an interest in my brother, either. But not anymore. If someone falls in love with my brother, there’s nothing I can do about it! Be it natural development, or divine intervention, somehow, I have matured! Of course, I wouldn’t say I go out of my way to encourage young maidens in love, but at least, I won’t get in their way! Thus, whomsoever my brother decides to date, I’ve decided to allow it.”

“Ah-ha...” Aiko was skeptical. Yoriko seemed quite confident about it, but Aiko had her doubts that Yoriko would keep her cool if such a situation ever arose.

“...Maybe I should just go home...” Aiko concluded gloomily, starting to think that all the sneaking around made her kind of pathetic. As his little sister, Yoriko may have had some right to gauge the situation, perhaps. But Aiko was in no position to comment on anything that Yuichi did. She was his classmate, his club mate, and his friend. No matter how she might try to frame it, Aiko wasn’t anything more to him.

“What are you talking about?” Yoriko snapped. “You’re going to run away after all this?”

“But...”

As Aiko dithered over what to do, Kanako appeared, walking up the steps from one of the lower platforms. She was wearing a white tulle skirt and a polka-dot blouse topped off with a brown cardigan. Aiko thought it made her look a bit like a rich heiress. She had heard that Kanako’s family wasn’t actually that well off, yet she looked more like an heiress than Aiko, whose family was genuinely wealthy. It was a difficult feeling to deal with.

“But that, there... it’s truly fiendish, isn’t it?” Yoriko gulped from Aiko’s side.

Aiko immediately understood what she meant. The white blouse emphasized Kanako’s large breasts more than ever. And the way the unbuttoned cardigan hung down the front just called even more attention to it.

“Exactly noon,” said Aiko. “Which means Sakaki has been waiting for about thirty minutes...” Aiko remembered that Yuichi had come early when they were supposed to meet, too.

“Big Brother... I mean, my brother can be somewhat irresponsible at times, but this is one area in which he never slacks,” Yoriko said, somehow proudly.

“I’ve been wondering about this, but you always refer to Sakaki as ‘my brother’ instead of ‘big brother’ in front of people,” commented Aiko. “Why is that?” It was a little thing, but she had wondered about it when they’d first met.

“Oh, no major reason,” said Yoriko. “If I call him ‘big brother,’ I get people referring to him as ‘Yoriko’s big brother.’ But I am the only one who has the right to call him that! And in order to protect that right, I will call him what I must in front of others!”

“Ah, okay... oh, it looks like they’re moving.” As Aiko was trying to figure out how to react to that, she noticed Yuichi and Kanako heading for the ticket gate together.

“Here we go!” Yoriko pursued them excitedly.

Realizing it was too late to turn back now, Aiko started to follow.

*****

Yuichi and Kanako came to a cafe near the station.

Yuichi cast a glance at the seats closest to the entrance. Remembering how the truck had crashed into the cafe there before, he headed for a seat further in.

“Is something wrong with this restaurant?” Kanako asked him, perhaps finding his manner strange.

“I ran into a little trouble here back in July,” Yuichi said. “I’m still kinda jumpy about it.”

As he spoke, he took a seat at a table, and Kanako sat down opposite him.

Yuichi put in his order with the waiter, then asked, after a moment, “You want places students normally go, right? Should I ask what the setting of the novel is? Maybe I could give you some advice...”

“Um, the title is *The Half-Isekai Classroom*,” said Kanako.

“...I thought it was a school story, but it still has to do with an isekai, huh?” Yuichi felt a little bit worn out by the idea.

“The basic plot is that a whole school is transported to another world, and there’s a bit of a survival element,” Kanako said.

It seemed to Yuichi the kind of story that Mutsuko would like; maybe it was Mutsuko’s influence that had led her to the idea.

“So they go to an isekai, right?” he said. “Where do the normal high school hang-out spots come in, in that case?”

“The truth is... I don’t have any ideas...” Kanako cradled her head in her hands and rested her elbows on the table.

Yuichi found the gesture very writer-like, but it sounded like the situation was more serious than he’d thought. “No ideas at all?”

“All I came up with was the prologue! I haven’t thought anything about how the story should unfold, but I still have to write it!” Kanako suddenly sat up again. Now that he looked closer, he could see bags under her eyes. She must not have slept at all last night.

“Um... Orihara, you look like you’re at your wits’ end,” said Yuichi. “When’s the deadline, exactly?”

“I have to have a first draft by the end of September. But I’ve only written the prologue...”

Today was Sunday of the second week of September. That meant she had to write the rest in a little less than three weeks.

“Um, should you really be doing this, then?” Yuichi asked. “Shouldn’t you be at home, writing the manuscript?”

“If just sitting in front of a desk would fill my head with ideas, I wouldn’t be having any trouble!” Her bloodcurdling expression took Yuichi aback.

“Um, sorry.”

“Oh? I’m sorry... I didn’t mean...” Kanako remembered herself and apologized.

“You don’t have to apologize,” he said. “But what should we do? Can I be of any help?”

Yuichi had thought she’d just needed to visit some random high school haunts, so now he was stumped. It sounded like an urgent situation.

“Yeah,” Kanako said. “Um, it’s important to try new things, I think. It can change your inspiration and point of view. Since the protagonist is in high school, I thought that finding out how normal high school students think, and the kinds of places they go, would be good reference.”

“Oh, I see,” said Yuichi. “Okay. I’ll do anything I can to help. So what’s in the prologue you’ve written?” It was unlikely that a layman high school student could offer any advice to a professional writer, but she really seemed to be at her wits’ end, so maybe he could help dislodge something.

“The love interest is decapitated in the gymnasium,” said Kanako.

“The protagonist tries to stop it, but he’s not in time. That’s the prologue.”

“The love interest dies?!” Yuichi couldn’t say she shouldn’t do it, but it seemed a bit off for a light novel.

“Yeah... is it bad if she dies?” Kanako tilted her head prettily.

“Um, so... it’s not a thing where she didn’t really die, or it’s a fantasy story so she comes back to life later, or it was really her twin sister who died, or it was a hallucination, or something like that?” he asked.

“No. She’s really dead. Otherwise, the protagonist’s actions afterwards will seem like a farce.”

“The love interest really never appears again?” he asked incredulously.

“...in flashbacks, mostly?” She tilted her head prettily again, but it wasn’t enough to distract Yuichi from his confusion.

“If it’s giving you trouble, couldn’t you change it?” he asked. “Have her saved in the nick of time, maybe?”

“No!” Kanako insisted. “I have it in my head that the love interest threw away her life to save the protagonist, and she’s killed by a god of death in the form of angel! I can’t change it!”

“What made you decide to do that, anyway?” Yuichi asked.

“Well, I was told that impact is the most important thing for the beginning of a story...”

“So you were only thinking about the impact... I guess I really can’t advise you on the story, after all,” he said. “Then cheering you up is the best I can do. Have you thought about where you want to go next?”

Kanako silently shook her head.

“I see... sorry,” Yuichi said regretfully. “I should have asked more before we came out here. Then I could have thought more on places to go.”

Yuichi had only ever gone around in the city with girls he was related to, so he didn’t know much about where kids usually went.

“We’re high school students, right?” he asked. “So we wouldn’t go anywhere that costs too much money... maybe karaoke, or to a movie. A zoo’s a bit childish... what about an aquarium?” Unable to think of much in particular, he began naming random things in desperation.

Kanako smiled, seeming to find that funny.

“Ah, did I say something awkward?” he asked.

“No, I was thinking you’re a nice boy, Sakaki the Younger.”

“Please don’t tease me,” he said. Kanako was older than him, but Yuichi still didn’t like being treated like a child.

*****

Aiko and Yoriko followed the couple stealthily into the restaurant, and took seats some distance away.

“This is the restaurant the truck crashed into,” said Aiko.

That had been at the end of July, after their summer camp, and it looked like the damage had been completely repaired.

“I suppose they’ll have lunch here first,” said Yoriko.

“It looks like they’re talking about something, but I can’t tell what...” Aiko wondered what they were supposed to accomplish by sitting this far away.

Yoriko just gave her a confident wink. It was in theatrical gestures like that that her relation to Mutsuko was plain to see. “It’s okay. I can read lips!”

“You’re really talented, Yoriko...” Aiko said. Yoriko was extremely strong and even had special skills like lip reading. Her resume was very impressive.

After they ordered lunch, Yoriko began reading their conversation with an intent expression. Aiko just watched quietly, knowing she shouldn’t interrupt.

“He’s saying they might go to karaoke or a movie or an aquarium... wait a minute, this really is a date!” Yoriko said in indignation after a while.

She’d said before she wouldn’t get in their way, but just as Aiko had thought, she really couldn’t accept it.

“Isn’t the aquarium a little far?” Aiko asked. “Oh, but there’s a shellfish museum close by...”

“That one’s nothing but lines of oyster shells,” said Yoriko. “Only a real ocean geek would want to go there for a date...”

“You’ve been there?” Aiko asked.

“My dating spot simulations are perfect!”

“Ahh...”

“I beg your pardon! Why are you looking at me like that?”

It sounded like she had been planning out places to go with Yuichi. Aiko found it funny, but Yoriko didn’t seem to take it that way.

“It must be material for a story, right?” Aiko asked, changing the subject. “I wonder what kind.”

“It seems it’s an isekai school story, but she’s having trouble because she hasn’t figured anything out... but it’s a bit unfair, don’t you think?” Yoriko burst out. “If it’s for a story, there are no limits to what she could ask for! She could even drag him to a love hotel!”

“What are you talking about, Yoriko?” Aiko was taken aback by her use of the term. It was terrifying, the things middle school students knew these days.

“Oh, please, don’t act so flustered,” Yoriko said. “There are light

novels about high school big brothers and middle school little sisters going to love hotels, aren't there?"

"Wouldn't that be against some sort of law?!" Aiko had a hard time believing something like that really existed.

"Regardless, it is clear that Orihara has become a powerful rival," Yoriko said. "She's just playing the airhead to get my brother to do whatever she wants. And he'll *do* whatever she wants, so it's not a bad racket..." Yoriko's listless sigh had a strange emotion behind it.

"Speaking of which, how do you view me, Yoriko?" Aiko asked. Talking with her like this made Aiko feel a little bit strange. She had been sure that Yoriko hated her, after all.

"I'm on guard about you as a rival too, all right?" Yoriko snapped. "But of the women in my brother's presence, I think you're one of the safer ones."

"The safer ones?" Aiko wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"Because you're not aggressive," Yoriko added. "Although I *was* surprised when you came at him that night at the training camp!"

"Th-That was different! I was, um, sleepwalking, and..." To be precise, Aiko hadn't really been sleepwalking. She'd remembered some of it, and though it had been through a sort of madness, she had done it all willingly.

"I know that," Yoriko said. "You would never have the backbone for it, after all."

"I-It's not about backbone... I..." Aiko stammered, feeling a little flustered by what sounded like mockery.

As they were talking, the dishes they ordered arrived, and Aiko decided to distract herself with her food.

*****

It all felt a bit strange to Kanako, walking around town with her friend's little brother.

It was her first time walking around with a boy like this, but she wasn't especially nervous, maybe because Yuichi was acting the way he always did.

Kanako had had many attempted suitors in the past, but she had rejected them all. She didn't have that much confidence in her looks, but she knew objectively that she had a large chest, so she hadn't been able to escape the thought that that was all they were looking at.

If they were interested in her breasts, then it followed that if she had a relationship with them, they would eventually have children. And as she had told Yuichi before, Kanako had no faith in her ability to love a child.

"Um... can we talk about something not related to your next novel?" Yuichi asked. They had left the cafe and gone walking, and

he'd proposed the change of subject with an apologetic tone.

"Yes," Kanako said. "Don't worry about it. I just want you to act like you always do." She felt bad for Yuichi, who was trying so hard. At the same time, she found it cute.

"Oh, really?" Yuichi said, looking relieved. "So, um... I read your book."

"Did you?" Kanako asked. "Why now? Was it because you were going out with me today?"

"Yeah, pretty much. I borrowed it from my sister and read it." Yuichi winced as she saw right through him. "It's not what I imagined, from hearing my sister talk about it. I thought the protagonist would be a real tough guy."

"Yes," Kanako agreed. "In the first volume, he doesn't even have a proper fight, and his power isn't very good." The protagonist of *My Demon Lord Is Too Cute to Kill and Now the World is in Danger!* was the Hero of Scales. The only power he had was to know which of two choices was better, and as of the first volume, it had been completely useless.

"But it was really fun," Yuichi added.

Maybe he was just being solicitous, but Kanako thanked him anyway.

Then she froze.

She didn't know why she had frozen, at first. Her mind had made a connection, unconsciously, and signaled her body to stop. But it took longer than that instant for her conscious mind to recognize the reason.

The surrounding world seemed to drift away. Everything around her was hazy. Only one tiny portion of it remained, cast into bright, vivid relief.

On the other side of Yuichi, not far away, a father and mother were walking with their child.

The boy, still very young, stood between them, jumping and playing.

The very picture of a happy family; that was what anyone would think. But Kanako rejected it. She knew it couldn't be true.

She searched that picture for any sign, no matter how trivial, of the unhappiness that surely lurked beneath. But she could not find it. Not even a fragment.

Kanako's mind could not accept what she was seeing.

She didn't want to understand what it meant.

To see her absent mother, Chinatsu, smiling happily at her child.

*****

Kanako Orihara's mother had never said a single kind word to her.

Kanako hadn't realized that was true until she went over to a friend's house to play in middle school. But even then, there had been nothing she could do about it.

What if her friend got 80% on a test? That was above average, and she would receive praise from her mother for such a score. Sometimes, she said, she even got extra snacks for it.

But what would Kanako's mother, Chinatsu Orihara, say about it?

"You know, I always got perfect scores on my tests in elementary school. Elementary school problems are so *easy*, you know." It wasn't open mockery, but her meaning was clear: anyone should be able to get a perfect score.

Kanako had decided, in that case, that she just had to get perfect scores. But when she did, and triumphantly declared that fact to her, her mother's attitude remained the same.

"You know, Kanako, nobody likes a braggart. Are you just studying to try to earn praise? That's not what it's for. You should be studying for your own sake." She'd admonish her daughter with a smile.

When she was very small, Kanako had often forgotten things she needed for school. This was something else she couldn't help. The teacher had even told her parents to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything, but Kanako's mother hadn't done that.

It wasn't that she'd forgotten, or that she'd found it too much trouble. She would carefully study all the print-outs, so that she would know what Kanako needed for the next day's class. But she wouldn't warn her daughter, or remind her. So Kanako would forget something, get yelled at, and come back. And what would follow?

"I knew it. You really are hopeless, Kanako." Her mother would laugh as if she'd done something outrageous. "I knew about it since yesterday, but if I told you, you wouldn't learn anything from it," she would assert.

One time, Kanako had vomited in school. It was because of her mother's cooking, which appeared to have been rotten.

She'd spent some time in the hospital then, and her mother had come dutifully to her side. Yet even then, she'd shown no signs of apology. "I took a bite and thought it tasted strange, but you seemed to be enjoying it, so I assumed it was fine..."

It wasn't enough to be called neglect, and she'd taken just enough care of her daughter so as not to invite comment. She'd never been violent to her or used abusive language. She just never said one kind word, or supported her, ever.

When Kanako's father was around, he often took her side. But her father was busy with work, so he was almost never home. That left her all alone with her mother.

Her words, so gentle on the outside, yet so laced with venom, slowly opened a wound inside Kanako.

There was no one to protect her, no one to see how deeply she'd been hurt.

Over time, she began to think of her mother as a monster. An insect without a human heart. A poor machine programmed to act like a mother.

Such thoughts were how Kanako shielded herself from the unbearable thought that a mother might feel spite towards her child.

Her mother had left right after summer vacation had started in her first year of middle school. It had been an amicable separation.

Kanako should have welcomed the departure of the mother who did not love her. Even if it made her life a little harder, it should have been nothing compared to the psychological burden she had borne during the previous years. Indeed, that might seem to be the case, on the surface.

The reality was different.

In reality, Kanako felt a deep sense of abandonment.

Kanako had avoided coming home most days because she hadn't wanted to see her mother, but having her completely removed from her life opened a void inside her heart. It made Kanako realize that no matter how her mother treated her, she still loved her mother, and wanted to be loved by her.

A monster, an insect, a machine. She had tried to tell herself that her mother was these things, but in the end, she never convinced herself of it.

Instead, her heart had continued holding on to a dream. Perhaps, when she grew up, then she would be able to understand and forgive her mother. Perhaps they would be able to look back together and laugh at all that had happened.

But with her mother gone, that had been no longer possible. In place of that dream came a deep sense of rejection.

Kanako hadn't cared what might happen anymore, to anyone.

"It was just a divorce," some might say. "It's not like it was abuse, just insufficient affection."

But it didn't feel that way to Kanako.

It was a little while after her mother had left her that Kanako had begun to think about suicide.

*****

The next thing Kanako knew, she was in her own room, in bed.

She reached a sluggish hand for the bedside table, and checked her alarm clock.

It was night.

She touched her face with her hands. Her eyelids were damp. She had a vague memory of crying.

Yuichi must have brought her home. She wondered how worried he must have been after seeing her freeze up like that.

But as the memory of that afternoon came back to her, she realized that she didn't care.

The sight of that happy family.

She couldn't understand.

That woman shouldn't have been capable of such an expression. She wasn't a happy, loving person who smiled kindly at her child.

It was unbelievable.

All that woman did was look down on people and laugh at them. She simply wasn't capable of loving anybody.

As long as that was the case, it would be fine. It was a hard thing for Kanako to accept, but after her mother had been gone for a while, she'd begun to think of things that way. Maybe her mother had just been born that way, or maybe it was something in how she had been raised, but Kanako had decided that that was the reason her mother hadn't loved her, and she was trying to forgive her for that. She simply could not hate her mother.

"Why..." Kanako murmured to herself, even knowing that no answer would come to her.

"Shall I tell you?" But suddenly, there was a voice.

Kanako sat up and turned to face it.

A woman stood at the entrance to the room. A woman with glasses, whom she had seen before.

"First, let me quell any silly misconceptions you might have," the woman said. "The reason I'm here is that the front door was unlocked. I didn't just appear out of nowhere."

"You're the sorceress..." Kanako whispered. The woman she'd met in the library as a child that day. The woman who had set a book in front of her and left. The woman who had changed Kanako's life.

"I didn't think you'd make it this far. I thought you might kill yourself when your mother left," the woman whispered, with deep emotion in her voice.

Kanako could do nothing but stare, dumbstruck, at the woman.

It was definitely strange for a woman she'd only met once, long ago, to come barging into her room. But Kanako gave no thought to driving her out.

She didn't care about anything anymore. Whoever she was, or whatever she was saying to her... none of it mattered.

"I did want you to feel despair, but I can't have you completely breaking down," the woman said. "Please, try to get it together a bit more. There's no way I can win the Evil God story now, so I really

need my Plan B."

The woman walked closer, squatted down, and peered into Kanako's face. Kanako's eyes, reflected in the woman's, were empty, but Kanako couldn't tell.

“Well, never mind,” the woman said. “What I’m about to tell you will show me your true worth. If this doesn’t wake you up, then that’s that. Just another seed I planted that didn’t blossom.”

The woman put her hand to Kanako’s cheek. Then, she said:

“Your mother wanted a boy.”

Kanako couldn’t understand what she meant right away. Her mind was so scattered, she needed time just to process the string of sounds into words.

“That is to say, she didn’t want a girl,” the woman added helpfully.

At last, Kanako began to understand what she meant.

“That’s… all?” she whispered.

It couldn’t be true. Was that really all it was?

But she couldn’t deny it.

Her memory confirmed it.

The sinking feeling Kanako had always had, that no matter how good she was, she would never be loved… it had been accurate.

“Yes. That’s all. Life can be so unreasonable, can’t it?” the woman said dryly, as if not terribly invested in it.

The next thing Kanako knew, she was laughing weakly, her head hung. There was nothing she could have done about that. It had all been set in stone, the moment Kanako had been born into the world. But if that was all it took to keep her from being loved, then what was she supposed to do?

She hadn’t been wanted. She shouldn’t have been born.

She wished she had known earlier that from the very beginning, there was no hope to be lost.

“I didn’t have much faith in the ‘Isekai Writer,’ but I guess everything really is worth a try,” the woman said with a smile. “Now, do you feel sufficiently despairing of the world? Do you think it’s time to end it?”

The woman held out her hand.

Kanako stared at it dimly.

Chapter 6: In Imitation of the Half-Isekai Classroom

It was Monday. Yuichi was walking to school with Aiko. His expression was grave, and Aiko seemed listless, too.

“I hope Orihara is okay...” Aiko said.

“I haven’t tried to contact her since then,” said Yuichi. “I made sure she got home safe, though.”

Kanako had collapsed into Yuichi’s arms the day before. He had been at a loss as to what to do, but Aiko and Yoriko had appeared soon after and helped him take care of her.

They’d wanted to take her to a hospital, but all the while apologizing, Kanako had insisted that she wanted to go home.

The three of them had helped her back home. Yuichi had wanted to stick around for a while to look after her, but Kanako had been adamant that she be left alone to rest. He’d been worried, but he hadn’t been about to argue when she was so insistent, and so they’d left.

After returning home, Yuichi had told Mutsuko about what happened. Worried, Mutsuko had tried to get in touch with her, but in the end, Kanako’s condition remained a mystery.

“She might show up to club, but if it turns out she’s still home sick, I’ll go to check on her,” Yuichi said.

As they talked, eventually, they arrived at the school.

As they stepped onto the school grounds, Yuichi looked up at the sky. It was a casual gesture, since he didn’t expect to see anything. Yet, contrary to his expectations, he saw it there, proudly asserting its existence above the school building.

It was a giant, Western-style castle, floating upside-down in the sky.

“Is that it?” It seemed Yuichi was able to see it at last.

The castle stood upon a floating island, which itself was extremely large. The outskirts were lined with forests, with the castle walls closer to the center. Inside the castle walls was a courtyard, which surrounded the castle itself.

The castle was dotted with smaller buildings, ringed around a much larger, mountain-like structure.

Around the castle flew some kind of creature. It was not a bird, but a reptile, and from time to time, it breathed fire. A lizard-like

creature with wings.

"...That's a... dragon, right?" Yuichi asked. The dragon didn't seem to realize they were there, but thinking about what would happen if it did set a chill up his spine. There was nothing a human could do about something like that.

"It seems like it's come down pretty far... hey, do you see something reddish up there?" Beside him, Aiko was also looking up at the sky. She was talking about something even higher above the island. In places where the sky should have been blue, instead, it was faint red.

"The ocean?" Yuichi asked. "So it's not just a castle. An entire world is up in the sky up there, upside down... seriously, what the heck is going on?" Now that he could see it, it only seemed natural to find it bizarre. "I mean, it's pretty weird, isn't it? But what's even weirder is that people don't find it that weird..."

"That's true... but I can't help but feel like that's how it's always been..." Aiko murmured.

Everyone was way too calm about this. It wasn't that they couldn't see it. How could you see a castle floating upside-down in the sky, and just accept it as a normal part of the day?

But that was only the beginning.

There was a knight in armor standing at the entrance to the school building. He stood grandly astride a horse, looking down on the students as they filed in.

"Who... the hell is that?" Yuichi burst out.

There was something familiar about that armor. It looked like the set that had fallen on the roof a few days before.

It was moving, so clearly, there was someone inside of it now. With the label "Twelve Hell Kings" hanging above his head, the man stood by the entrance, checking each student as they came by.

The students all looked unhappy about having to line up, but none of them seemed at all dubious about the presence of the armored knight.

"Huh? It's Rochefort of the Twelve Hell Kings, isn't it?" Aiko asked Yuichi, as if that were obvious.

Blue Sky Rochefort, one of the Twelve Hell Kings who protected the Demon Lord.

"No, I mean, don't you find it bizarre?" Yuichi demanded. "Why is there a knight in armor at our school?!"

"Oh... you're right," said Aiko. "Huh? And how did I know that was Rochefort?" Aiko suddenly seemed to realize how strange it was that she had been able to recognize him.

They listened to the conversations of the students in the line.

"What's he doing?" one asked.

“He says he’s trying to see if Lady Lasagna is hiding among us.”

“Again? She goes missing all the time. She must be pretty bored up in that castle, huh?”

Demon Lord Lasagna. He had heard that name before, too. She was one of the main characters in Kanako’s story.

“Hey, we’d better line up quick so we won’t be late, right?” Aiko pointed to the line.

“Noro... please don’t adjust to this...” Yuichi wondered again how she could just accept it.

“Yu! Do you think this is an attack by a new Stand-user?” Mutsuko broke in.

“Are you suggesting there was an *old* Stand-user?” Yuichi asked.

At some point, Mutsuko had appeared behind him, and Yuichi objected to her comment in his usual way.

“But this is definitely a strange situation!” Mutsuko declared. “Yet, while I’m thinking about how it’s strange, somehow, it doesn’t seem so strange! Look! I sorta feel like those things have been here all along, too!”

Mutsuko was pointing at a large lizard running around nearby. It was about the size of a bird, and walked along on two fat legs, with two small arms that seemed purely vestigial. It was a theropod, a type of dinosaur.

“Noro, do you know what these things are?” Yuichi asked.

“They’re dragons, right?” Aiko asked. She seemed to find it completely normal, even as Yuichi stared in shock.

“No, no. Look, there have never been dragons on the school grounds!” Yuichi burst out.

“They nest around the castle and the Demon Lord looks after them, I think,” Aiko said.

“The Demon Lord looks after them...” Yuichi was just thinking he’d heard that somewhere before, when he heard a loud roar. The ground shook, and something came around the corner of the school building.

Yuichi stared up in mute amazement.

It was a giant statue, standing as tall as the third floor of the school building. The creature — the Colossus, most likely — turned its horned head, and looked down at Yuichi and the others.

Different worldviews...

Yuichi was starting to feel like he was realizing what that meant.

The term “worldview” had come up before every now and then, and he knew, rationally, that it could be a source of strange phenomena, but Yuichi had never wholeheartedly believed in it before now. Without such a grandiose idea, though, there was no way to explain what was going on here.

He could explain a serial killer as a criminal who was slightly stronger than most. Vampires and anthromorphs could just be other races that had existed for a long time in secret. Beings like The Head could just be bizarre things that happened now and again in the long course of human history.

But how could you explain a castle in the sky, a walking Colossus, and an armored knight looking over the students as if it was routine?

"What's wrong? You're scowling..." Aiko asked from beside him.

"Oh... I was just trying to process what I'm seeing," Yuichi said.

Aiko didn't seem to be thinking about it nearly as deeply.

"What do you think, Takeuchi?" Yuichi asked.

"I think it's clearly a bizarre phenomenon. And I find it extremely strange that everyone else is so accepting of it," Natsuki said in her usual dispassionate voice.

After class, Yuichi and the others walked past the athletic field to visit their club room in the old school building. Mutsuko had called a meeting.

He looked at the athletic field, at the little terrestrial dragons running to and fro. There seemed to be more now than there had been that morning.

He wondered if the effect had spread outside of the school at all, but he had no way of knowing. There had been a mist covering the grounds since around lunchtime, and because of that, most of the students had decided to put off going home. They seemed to assume it would lift soon enough.

As they entered the club room, they found Mutsuko waiting in front of the whiteboard, as usual.

Kanako wasn't there, but Yuichi hadn't really been expecting her.

"Now! This is a very interesting situation, but we can't exactly let it continue!" Mutsuko declared. "As a person who fights catastrophes wherever they strike, I feel I must act! We're going to break out of this situation!"

Mutsuko was fired up. It was a bit reassuring to see her acting the same as ever.

"How do we break out of this situation?" Yuichi asked as he sat down.

Aiko and Natsuki also took their seats.

"Good question. First of all, the state of affairs is limited to the school! There's no effect outside. In other words, the solution is probably somewhere on school grounds!" Mutsuko seemed to have investigated the surrounding situation before Yuichi and the others had arrived.

"That's better than the alternative, I guess," Yuichi said. Even so,

he wasn't about to let his guard down. There was no guarantee that the area of effect wouldn't expand.

"Now, the presence of Blue Sky Rochefort and the Colossus suggests that it has some connection to Orihara's book!" Mutsuko declared.

"That's true. The resemblance can't be a coincidence," Aiko agreed.

Aiko had read the most recent chapter published on the internet, so it had been easy for her to understand it. There were some respects in which Yuichi, who had only read the one published volume, couldn't keep up.

"By the way, Takeuchi, have you read it?" Yuichi asked.

"No, I haven't," Natsuki said without a trace of guilt.

"Yeah, I guess you wouldn't... could you see the castle in the sky?" Yuichi asked, suddenly curious.

"This morning, I could," Natsuki said. "Before then, I couldn't."

So at first, it had only affected those who had read Kanako's book, but as of today, it was even affecting those who hadn't. The phenomenon's influence was definitely expanding. Was it a matter of time passing, or had something triggered it? He couldn't be sure, but Yuichi felt that they had to resolve it ASAP.

"At any rate, it's clear that Orihara is involved, somehow," Mutsuko said. "Which means the first thing we have to do is find her."

"Orihara didn't come to school?" Yuichi asked.

"Yeah, she was absent today," said Mutsuko. "And she's hardly ever late or absent!"

"I guess the only place to look is her house, then," Yuichi mused. She had felt ill on Sunday, so she might still be resting up.

"I already sent Sakiyama at your sister's request," said Natsuki. "He said she wasn't in her house."

"I really wish you guys would stop asking him for help..."

Sakiyama was Natsuki's subordinate, a large man whose hobby was stalking. He lived with Natsuki, and he could also drive a car, so Mutsuko used him whenever she needed to carry large objects around.

"Maybe she was just pretending to be out?" Yuichi suggested. If she felt really bad, it was conceivable.

"You underestimate my stalker," said Natsuki. "He can easily infiltrate his target's home and find them effortlessly, even if they're hiding. He searched every inch of that house and reported to me that there was nobody there. Based on the lingering smell on her underwear and clothing, he was able to infer that Orihara had been in her house until late Sunday night. It seems her father hasn't been back for some time, but he could smell the recent presence of another woman there."

“That’s terrifying!” Yuichi exclaimed. The encroachment of the isekai was certainly worth worrying about, but Yuichi still wondered if they shouldn’t do something about that guy first.

“Sakiyama is still staking out her house, so we also know she hasn’t come back yet,” Natsuki added.

“Terrifying!” Yuichi repeated. “Just call him back already!” It might lead to a tragedy if Kanako came home while he was still there.

“But there must be a way to find her even if she’s not home, right?” Aiko asked. “Mutsuko, don’t you know any places Orihara might go?”

Mutsuko was the one who knew Kanako best, so if she didn’t have any ideas, then they were out of options.

“I can’t really think of anywhere,” Mutsuko said. “She likes isekai stories, so all I can think of is ‘she went to an isekai.’”

“That’s not helpful at all!” Yuichi exclaimed. Even if she couldn’t think of anything, that answer was too ridiculous.

“Places Orihara might go...” Aiko made a show of thinking, but nothing seemed to come.

“Hey, can Sakiyama trace where Orihara went from her house?” Yuichi demanded.

“Stalking” could also refer to the idea of tracking one’s prey, so Yuichi wondered if Sakiyama might have that ability, too.

“...There are limits to how well he can trace someone he’s not obsessed with...” Natsuki offered, apologetically, after thinking it over.

Yuichi felt glad that he couldn’t.

“This situation seems to have something to do with her story, so maybe we could get a clue from that?” Aiko asked, in a tone that suggested they were running low on options.

“I thought about that, but an isekai fantasy doesn’t make for very good reference, as far as concrete places Orihara could be...” Mutsuko replied, equally at a loss. “Still, even if the story’s no help, I feel like she has to be somewhere in the school,” she added with a sigh.

“Why’s that?” Yuichi asked. He couldn’t begin to imagine what basis she had for suggesting that.

“If Orihara is doing this, I have a feeling she’d have to be close by to get the phenomenon to spread to this degree,” Mutsuko explained. “There’s no way she’s a long-range power type!”

Her declaration was firm, but Yuichi was dubious. He couldn’t imagine Kanako having that sort of power either way.

“By the way, Sis, don’t you have cameras in the school? Couldn’t they tell you something?” he asked. Her extremely illegal actions might just come in handy this time. They could tell if Kanako had come to school by watching the recordings.

“Oh, no, Yu,” Mutsuko admonished. “In the interest of privacy, I

only stream real-time video! I *never* record!"

"What kind of line is that to draw? And don't act so proud about it, either!" Yuichi objected even as he stood up. "Anyway, standing around here talking isn't doing us any good. You do your real-time monitoring here, Sis. I'm going to search the school."

"I'm going, too!" Aiko joined him on her feet.

"Okay, Noro," he said. "You're with me. What about you, Takeuchi?"

"I'll check the new school building. Why don't you two start with the old school building?" With that, Natsuki quickly left.

The other two were about to leave when Mutsuko stopped them.

"Hold on a minute! There's a place where the camera's acting funny! I'm not getting any picture!" she announced.

"Where is it?" Yuichi asked.

"The gym! They shouldn't break down over just anything..."

Yuichi remembered something about a gym in Kanako's new story. She had said she'd only written the prologue, but that it had started in the gym.

"If it has something to do with her story, then she might be there," Yuichi said.

With that, the three of them headed for the gym.

The minute they entered, they noticed something wrong. It was cold enough there that they could see their breath.

"What... is going on here?!" Aiko hugged herself, shivering. Their summer uniforms weren't made to deal with cold like this.

There was a white sheen over the entire interior of the gym, caused by a fog that seemed to cover everything.

The stage was surrounded by a wall of ice that reached all the way to the ceiling. Yuichi thought he could see someone on the other side of that pale blue ice, but he couldn't tell for sure.

In front of the wall of ice stood a knight in armor on a horse. The armor he was wearing was the armor that had fallen from the sky the other day, and he was the man who had been checking the students that morning at the school building: Blue Sky Rochefort of the Twelve Hell Kings.

"I knew it! I knew it was strange that the camera wasn't picking up the gym!" Mutsuko pointed to the second floor catwalk. If there was a camera there, Yuichi couldn't see it. "I made the camera small enough to make it hard to see, which must give it problems with durability. And it's meant for indoor use, so I guess it couldn't stand up to the below zero temperatures!"

Mutsuko was usually eminently prepared for things that would never come up, but it seemed even she hadn't taken the temperature

of the gym into account.

"Blue Sky Rochefort! Are you the one behind this?" Yuichi wasn't quite sure how to address a character from a fantasy story, so he decided to just be direct. He had a feeling they were going to be fighting soon.

"Indeed. And you shall not pass!" the knight declared. It was about 30 meters from the entrance to the stage. But his heavy, low voice reverberated through the gym, clearly audible.

"I see." Beside Yuichi, Mutsuko folded her arms and nodded. "That means there *must* be something here!"

"Um, could I ask why we can't pass? We're looking for someone!" Aiko asked loudly, with no sense of fear in her voice. As far as Yuichi could tell, she wasn't afraid of Rochefort at all.

Surprisingly, Rochefort did not hesitate to answer Aiko's question. "If it is the girl within the barrier that you seek, then I cannot let you see her. Although it is unlikely that you will accept it, I shall tell you the reason why."

"Rochefort is an honorable person, so he'll answer whatever you ask honestly," Aiko whispered to Yuichi. She probably just knew him from the story, but she seemed to also trust him to a strange degree.

"I am searching for the Demon Lord Lasagna, and I have determined that she is not here," the knight explained. "Thus, I wish to return to my castle, but cannot do so under my own power. To return, I must have a spellcaster link our worlds. I was told that there were those who would find this inconvenient, and try to stop it. So I stand guard over the spellcaster here as I wait for the spell to complete. If you have business with the spellcaster, you may speak to her after the spell is cast."

"Rochefort sure does love to monologue..." Aiko said, with some strange understanding.

But Yuichi knew they couldn't wait for the spell to complete.

"Sis, can I borrow those?" He pointed at the fingerless gloves Mutsuko wore, which he usually tried to ignore.

"Huh? What do you want with your big sister's sweaty old gloves?" she asked.

"I don't want *those*! I want their function that you're always bragging about!" he shot back.

"If you must!" she declared. "Which do you want, Mors or Renatus?"

"You named them?! Ebony and Ivory, Gan Jiang and Mo Ye, whatever you call them, just give me both!"

"Oh, c'mon... if you wore the ones I'd made you, you could've used them any time you wanted!" Mutsuko grumbled as she handed over her gloves.

They were a little small, but Yuichi quickly put them on. “By the way, are you wearing your sabers today?”

Hearing that those might come in handy, too, Mutsuko’s eyes snapped open wide. “I can’t believe it! Why did you have to ask that *today,* of all days? Ah, my sabers are out for maintenance on the one day Yu wants to wear them! I’m so stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid!”

“I didn’t want to wear them, and I’m not going to ask about how you maintain them, or we’ll be here all day,” he said. Leaving Mutsuko to her self-recrimination, he turned to Aiko. “So anyway, Noro. I need some cash. How many 500 yen coins do you have?”

“Sure, but have you even paid me back for the last time?” she asked.

“I figured we were even after I bought the present for Yori?”

“That wasn’t enough to pay it off. You really have to pay me back.” Aiko looked a bit frustrated, but withdrew three 500 yen coins from her purse and handed them to Yuichi.

Yuichi gripped them in his hand, then turned back to Rochefort. The knight had been quietly watching their discussion.

“Is it true that you’re honorable, and you’ll answer honestly to whatever I ask?” Yuichi asked Rochefort as he took one step forward, bringing his fists together.

“If it does not speak ill of or harm another, I will answer,” the knight said.

“How do I get inside?”

“Hmm... what you are thinking of doing is not incorrect,” the knight said. “The barrier is maintained with my magic. If you can defeat me, it will naturally disperse.”

Rochefort watched Yuichi prepare for battle. There was no pretense to his manner; it seemed he was simply telling the truth.

And then, Yuichi stepped forward.

Holding the bridle in his left hand, Rochefort turned the right hand to the sky. There was no warning given. He had deemed that Yuichi had crossed the line.

Balls of ice appeared out of thin air, enough to completely coat the ceiling of the gym. They then began to elongate, forming spears of ice, whose chillingly pointed tips all turned towards Yuichi.

“Sis! Stand back!” Yuichi shouted. Yuichi had assumed Rochefort wouldn’t be targeting the girls, but there were so many of the projectiles, it was possible they could be hit by stray fire.

The second the spears were fired, Yuichi flew forward.

As he ran, he watched them.

Rochefort hadn’t fired all the ice spears at once. He must have been preparing a second and third wave, in case the first one missed. As the first wave fired, the ice spears of the second wave continued to

train their sights on Yuichi.

The first stage hit where Yuichi had been. The second stage shot off to where Yuichi was expected to be — Yuichi moved diagonally forward, accelerating to dodge those. The third wave, seeming to determine that they couldn't get him by focusing on any point, just struck the ground randomly around him.

Ironically, it was one of these wild attacks that was coming straight for him. Rather than dodging, he just charged forward, and knocked it away with the back of his hand. He was testing to see if Mutsuko's gloves could deflect the attack, and it seemed their blade-resistance really did beat out the sharpness of the ice spears.

Yuichi ran forward even more boldly. Knowing that he could block them increased his options exponentially.

The spears in the air continued to refresh themselves. As if part of a floating phalanx, they simply appeared, one after another after another.

Through the spears that fell like rain, Yuichi dodged, deflected, blocked, grabbed, smashed, and all the while continued moving forward.

Occasionally a spear appeared from below, and these he dodged by instinct. As he got closer, the air grew colder, and that he simply powered through. Yuichi wasn't so weak as to be frozen by a little chill like this.

His opponent, Rochefort, never moved. He remained precisely where he was, right arm upraised. Was he hoping to protect the ice wall, or could he simply not move while using his magic?

Continuing to keep the spears at bay, Yuichi made it within melee range.

The rain of ice spears abruptly ceased; it wasn't precise enough for Rochefort to safely employ so close to his person. But that didn't mean Yuichi was out of the woods.

Still gripping the reins, Rochefort flicked his left hand. It produced a pistol, as if by magic, pointed at Yuichi.

Rochefort was a cuirassier. The main weapon of such knights in medieval Europe was the handgun, and he fired his without hesitation. Yuichi dodged to the side, and in that same instant, he threw the coins he held in his hand.

The three flat discs pierced Rochefort's left wrist guard. The gun flew into the air and bounced off the ceiling, and in that moment, Yuichi sprang forward. He dove at Rochefort, and struck his chest with his knee.

There was a loud bang, and Rochefort lost his balance, but that was it. The defensive properties of the armor had negated Yuichi's attack.

Rochefort was falling off his horse. Yuichi, falling with him, lashed out to wrap his left arm around Rochefort's neck.

His right fist drew back with a punch.

They hit the floor hard, and in that instant, he thrust his right fist forward.

Yuichi's fist pierced Rochefort's armor, and made contact with his flesh.

*****

As the battle began, the girls quickly escaped the gym.

Then they poked their heads back in, to see what was going on inside.

"Um... he's using some magic on Sakaki that I'm sure he's never seen before, but..." Aiko knew about Yuichi's abilities, but it still surprised her. It was magic, after all. Normally, someone would be surprised by that; they might even be forced to hesitate. But Yuichi dealt with it like it all went without saying.

"Even if it's magic, if it's not 'Eternal Force Blizzard! Everyone dies!' you can work around it, right?" Mutsuko replied. "Having ice flying at you isn't so different from being fired at with guns, and from what I can see, it's actually slower than bullets!" Mutsuko's words made sense, but still, it was a constant rain of icicles. There was nothing simple about it.

"And then he just punched him in the armor... wait, did he punch through it? Armor shouldn't..." It shouldn't break that easily, Aiko thought.

"Oh! Armor looks really sturdy, but it's actually not!" Mutsuko said excitedly. "They have to balance defense and weight through trial and error, so even the heaviest armor is only about five mm thick. And armor got phased out since it couldn't defend against bullets, so you know it can be broken through!"

"Still, it shouldn't be possible to punch through five mm of steel..." Aiko murmured.

"The part of the gloves covering the proximal phalanges incorporates a special alloy! Yu borrowed them to use them against the armor from the start!" Mutsuko continued giddily. The more she explained, the more ridiculous it sounded.

"Um... I hope Mr. Rochefort is okay..." Aiko said.

Rochefort had fallen from his horse, and was no longer moving. Yuichi stood up, but just stood there beside him, not trying to do anything else.

"What? Noro, are you worried about the enemy?" Mutsuko asked.

"Well, um, I don't think Mr. Rochefort is a bad person," Aiko said. "At least as far as I've read the story..."

Most of the Twelve Hell Kings who guarded the Demon Lord were bad people, but Rochefort didn't seem to have ulterior motives. He was a simple, straightforward man.

"I dunno what might happen next, but I guess we'd better get going!" Mutsuko declared.

The mist that had filled the gym, and the icicles that had been stuck into the floor, were starting to disappear, now that they no longer had Rochefort's magic to power them. Yuichi had won.

Aiko and Mutsuko ran up to Yuichi.

Yuichi looked down at the fallen Rochefort.

"Well done..." Rochefort whispered, as he and his steed began to fade away.

"What are you..." Yuichi looked at the disappearing Rochefort in surprise.

"It seems I was a mere projection, from the start... there was no need for me to return to the castle at all," the knight said. "I regret my loss... but the real me is far greater. If ever you must face him, be prepared."

With those as his last words, Rochefort was gone without a trace. Only the scars left by the ice spears remained behind, to tell the tale of the battle that had just taken place.

"Here." Yuichi handed the fingerless gloves back to Mutsuko.

"Aww, why? They're so cool!" she cried.

"They're broken," Yuichi said, not meeting her eyes.

"Oh! Well, that's that, I guess!" Mutsuko said, seeming to accept the excuse at face value.

Aiko had her doubts, though; he was probably just embarrassed to keep wearing them.

With Rochefort gone, the wall of ice covering the stage was beginning to fade away, as well.

The three of them turned their eyes to what lay beyond.

There was a girl there, on her knees, supporting herself on a staff clutched in two hands. The staff was highly decorated, as if it was designed to be a ritual item. She was dressed like a witch, with a cape over her shoulders, and a wide-brimmed hat on her head. She appeared to be praying.

"What are you doing, Orihara?" Yuichi asked, his tone one of exasperation mixed with relief.

Aiko let out a sigh of relief herself. The girl up on the stage was definitely Kanako, and aside from her strange outfit, she seemed okay.

"Orihara! If you wanted to play witchy girl, there are better ways!" Mutsuko moaned. "This is such a cliché! C'mon! You have so many more options these days, even pink frilly dresses!"

“You just found your missing friend, and that’s the first thing you have to say?!” Yuichi reproached her.

“Orihara, let’s go back together. Everyone’s worried about you, okay?” Aiko called to her, calmly.

It was at this that Kanako finally responded. She lifted her face and gazed at Aiko and the others, glassy-eyed, like she had just woken up from a trance.

“Sakaki... everyone...” Kanako murmured.

“Orihara! You shouldn’t try to be a magical girl until you’ve done more preparation!” Mutsuko called indignantly. “You could have gone through the club room and found much better stuff!”

But Kanako shook her head. “I’m going to an isekai. Actually... I’m calling one here. The sorceress said that would be faster...”

“Orihara!” Aiko called. “Can’t we find another way to get you to an isekai? You’re affecting too many other people this way!”

Kanako picked herself up on trembling legs, and timidly raised her staff above her head.

“Yah!” She swung the staff down with a half-hearted cry.

Aiko was staring dumbly, waiting to see what would happen, when Yuichi suddenly grabbed her.

“Huh?” Aiko breathed in surprise as she found herself suddenly in motion. Yuichi touched down some ways away, in that same instant, she saw a wall appear in the space she had just been.

A wall of ice had formed between them and the stage, crackling frigidly.

Kanako looked just as surprised as they were, which suggested to Aiko that she wasn’t trying to hurt them. She just didn’t want to be interrupted.

The wall of ice Kanako had made was less substantial than Rochefort’s — it was thin, brittle-looking, and fully transparent — but it seemed that buying time was all Kanako wanted to do, and she ran backstage and disappeared.

Yuichi struck the wall of ice with his fist. He easily opened a hole in it, but that didn’t bring the whole thing crashing down, and the hole he had opened slowly filled in.

“Dammit! We’ll get outside and head her off around back!” he shouted. Giving up on destroying the wall, Yuichi ran for the exit.

Aiko was about to run, too, when suddenly, the whole gym began to shake with a loud noise.

“Huh? What? An earthquake?” Aiko instinctively crouched down. It felt like something big was happening.

The shaking quickly subsided, and the next thing Aiko knew, Yuichi was at her side.

Just as she was beginning to wonder if the earthquake was Kanako’s doing, too, she heard the sound of static coming over the speakers.

“I will now explain the game. I’ll only say this once, and I will not take questions. There are three basic rules:

“One, violence is prohibited.

“Two, If you lose your right to exist, you die. Check the back of your hand, please. You should see the Roman numeral III there. That represents your right to exist. When you begin the game, all players have three, and you each lose one every hour.

“Three, players can gamble these with each other in any way they wish. I guarantee that all debts will be paid.

“This ends the explanation. There are other rules, but you can learn them as you play. Now, let’s start the game.”

The announcement came without warning, then cut off just as abruptly, allowing no room for discussion.

“Is that... Miss Shikitani?” Aiko asked. She had recognized that blunt way of speaking.

Aiko looked at the back of her hand, and indeed, she did see a “III” hovering in the air above it. It was vaguely luminescent, like a

hologram.

Yuichi also checked his hand. “Shikitani’s ability? But I thought she could only use it in enclosed spaces...”

Aiko remembered him explaining about that in Tomomi’s restaurant.

“What ability? Does that have something to do with these numbers appearing?” Mutsuko asked, and Yuichi explained: Makina’s abilities included “Sealed Room Game,” which let her set the rules in an enclosed space, and “Inviolable Domain,” which protected the objects necessary to keep the game going.

After hearing the explanation, Mutsuko tried bopping Yuichi with her fists in a mock tantrum, but they never reached his head. They just deflected and slipped off of him, like he was made out of rubber.

Next, Mutsuko lightly rapped her own head. This time, it hit. There seemed to be nothing preventing someone from touching oneself.

“So ‘Inviolable Domain’ forbids violence against others, I guess,” said Mutsuko. “I wonder if I could commit suicide? Or poison people?”

“Don’t even speculate,” Yuichi said. “We’re not gonna go along with that creep’s game.”

To check for himself, Yuichi reached for Mutsuko’s face, and his hand slipped off this time, too.

“What do you think of this, Yu?” she asked.

“If you could control your vectors perfectly, maybe...” Yuichi said.

“I see... I don’t suppose I can ask how you knew about all this, Yu?”

“...I don’t want to say yet,” Yuichi replied after a moment’s thought.

He must still be keeping Monika’s existence a secret from Mutsuko. Maybe he just didn’t want to rely on his big sister for everything.

“I see,” said Mutsuko. “Never mind about that, then! Let’s head for the new school building to do something about the person who made that announcement!” Even at a time like this, Mutsuko clearly couldn’t restrain her excitement.

As they left the gymnasium, Aiko turned her eyes to the new school building, then froze.

“Um... wait... what?” Aiko looked to Yuichi for explanation.

“You think I understand it?” Yuichi answered in an utterly baffled tone of voice.

Aiko looked at the new school building one more time to confirm.

The tip of the inverted castle was sticking into the building’s roof.

It was around 5:00 PM by the time they arrived at the new school building's entryway hall. It should have still been light outside at this time of day, but everything was rather dark, thanks to the fog.

The school building interior was unchanged, despite the spire of a castle sticking into it, but the students inside were far from unaffected.

Confused crying, level-headed discussion, reckless running around: their reactions were all over the map.

"It's no use! We can't leave the school grounds!" a group who had been checking things outside reported back.

"You mean it's not just the fog?!" somebody else cried.

"There's something like a wall there! And we can't get through it!"

This was Makina's "Inviolable Domain," the defensive field that protected things necessary for the game. It was probably covering the whole school.

Even the students who doubted the situation at first gradually seemed to be coming around to believing that the announcement was true.

The numbers hovering over their hands; the fact that they couldn't escape; the transparent membrane that covered each of the students, forbidding violence... It was all evidence that the rules stated in the announcement had been true.

"So, what do we do? Head for the broadcast room?" Yuichi asked Mutsuko. They had made it to the new school building, but he noticed that she didn't seem to have a game plan past that.

"First, to the roof!" she declared in response.

"You're not just saying that because you want to see the castle up close, right?" Yuichi asked dubiously.

Mutsuko showed him her tablet, which was streaming video from the roof.

He could see the castle tower intersecting with the roof, but there was no destruction. The joining was a clean one, as if they were co-existing in the same space. It looked like a piece of avant-garde sculpture. There was a woman in glasses there, too, walking along the roof.

Yuichi recognized her. It was Makina Shikitani.

"If she was the woman who made the announcement, then she's clearly the cause of all this!" Mutsuko declared. "If we can just do something about her, then we'll have time to work out Orihara's problem afterwards, right?"

"I'd be more surprised to hear she didn't have anything to do with this, yeah," Yuichi remarked. She had said it was a secret, but maybe Makina's original goal had been to get everyone in the school involved in her game.

"Let's proceed with caution!" Mutsuko declared. "She might have

set some traps on the way!"

"You look pretty happy about all of this, Sis..." Yuichi was feeling a bit fed up with his sister's eternal optimism.

"By the way, where's Takeuchi?" Aiko asked, as if only just remembering her.

"We don't have time to search, but knowing her, she'll figure it out on her own," Yuichi said. They hadn't run into Natsuki since parting ways in the club room, when she had said she would be searching for Kanako in the new school building. Aiko seemed to be worried about her, but that couldn't be their priority right now.

The group started heading for the roof. Mutsuko's prediction about traps proved wrong, and they easily reached it.

Nearly the entire roof was dominated by the castle's upside-down tower, but there was no sign of damage to the structure itself, confirming that there was some kind of supernatural phenomenon at play.

Yuichi looked up and saw the castle itself, even more massive than the tower already spearing the roof, and the vast stretches of land further up. The scale of it was so enormous, it made it hard to judge distance properly.

"If this is the tip of Castle Zalegrande, that must be the Demon Lord's living space." Mutsuko pointed to the upside-down veranda. "It looks like the woman in glasses got in through there."

"We've come this far," Yuichi said. "We'll just have to go inside."

He approached the veranda and peeked inside. It was a disorienting sight, with the ceiling and floor reversed. Thinking about it, the roof should have reached the third floor of the school by now, but they'd seen no influence from the castle there, suggesting some kind of dimension warping phenomenon must be involved.

The room didn't have the eerie sort of atmosphere you'd expect from a room in a Demon Lord's castle. It was done up all in white, and overflowing with good taste.

"How do we get in?" Yuichi asked. If they just jumped in, they'd drop to the ceiling, which was about five meters down. Yuichi would be okay, but he had his doubts that Mutsuko and Aiko could land safely.

"Yu, why don't you go in first and catch us?" Mutsuko asked.

"Yeah, that's probably the best option." Yuichi stepped in through the veranda window, readying his body to absorb the shock of the fall.

But his expectations were immediately betrayed, as his sense of up and down was suddenly flipped.

"Huh?" Yuichi was falling not towards the ceiling, but towards the floor, head-first. He quickly planted his hands, rolled forward, and

righted himself. He looked up and saw Mutsuko and Aiko, watching him through the window, upside-down.

"Gravity inversion?!" Mutsuko exclaimed. "That's so cool!"

"So much has happened that I'm not as surprised as I feel I should be..." Aiko muttered.

Mutsuko was overjoyed about it, but Aiko's feelings seemed more mixed.

"If we're just falling to the floor, that isn't too bad," Yuichi said. As long as they took their time, it shouldn't be a problem for them.

Mutsuko and Aiko entered carefully, clutching the windowsill. The minute they were inside the castle, their sense of up and down seemed to flip, though after a moment's disorientation, they got used to it.

Yuichi looked around the room again. It was a beautiful space, done up all in white. The large canopy bed in the middle suggested that it was a bedroom.

"Where did she go?" Yuichi wondered. There was no sign of anyone in the room.

"Good question," Mutsuko said. "If it's like the novel, this is the White Tower. If you go through the door across from the bed and follow the passageway, you'll get to the Black Tower. If you want to go somewhere else, you'd have to go down the stairway."

"Let's go to the Black Tower first." Yuichi's judgment was based purely on the thought that it would be annoying to have to climb back up the stairs once they'd gone down.

Chapter 7: Reckoning in Sky Castle Zalegrande! (While It's... You Know... Falling)

Kanako had been told that she was an "Isekai Writer." She could make the worlds she imagined become reality.

She hadn't been told why she was that way, but if it was something she could do, she decided, then it was worth a try. Even if her power could destroy the world, in the state she was in now, Kanako would use it without hesitation.

The sorceress had said the school was a good location. The powers of an "Isekai Writer" would increase with the number of readers she had. If she wanted to bring an isekai into being, the sorceress had told her, then she should use the school, where she already had influence.

Numbly, Kanako had done just as the sorceress said.

Her memories of what had happened after that were hazy. The next thing she knew, she was running across the athletic field away from Yuichi and the others. While outside, she saw the moment when the castle and the school overlapped.

The isekai was here. In that instant, Kanako felt the gears lock into place.

Kanako remembered that the sorceress was waiting for her on the roof.

This was a good start. Now she needed to be taught how to turn the entire world into an isekai.

She was just heading towards the new school building, when suddenly, that announcement began. It was the sorceress's voice. She was saying something about a game, but she had never mentioned anything to Kanako about this...

But then, the change was being fueled by her story, *The Half-Isekai Classroom.* Perhaps the sorceress was trying to recreate the tragedies that played out in the story.

Kanako had to go to the roof. Before now, just thinking about it would have filled her with terror, but now, she was at peace. She could use magic now. In this world, Kanako Orihara was effectively God.

Take me to Zalegrande Castle!

With that one wish, Kanako's body lifted into the air.

Trembling, with eyes clenched shut, Kanako flew. Soon, she

arrived on the roof.

She opened her eyes and looked down, but the sorceress was nowhere to be seen. Had she gone into the castle, then?

Kanako flew in through the rows of pillars above.

The minute she entered, the world twisted around her. Up and down had been reversed, but since Kanako was floating, the effect had been minor.

She touched down and looked around. She was in the mid-air corridor. It was lined with pillars, like walls, on either side, with archways supporting it. Magical lights lined the ceiling, making things as bright as daylight there.

Kanako knew this place. A slowly-curving hallway ten meters wide and a hundred meters long, linking the Black and White Towers.

This was the isekai that Kanako had created.

But right now, it only existed within the school, and this was far from the world that Kanako wanted.

Therefore, she needed to know. She needed the sorceress to tell her how to turn the whole world into an isekai.

Kanako began walking forward slowly, in the direction of the Black Tower.

The corridor's gentle curve prevented her from seeing all the way to the end of it, but before long, a person came into view. The woman in glasses, the sorceress, was standing in front of the door that led to the Black Tower. When she saw Kanako, a faint smile appeared on her lips.

"Thank goodness you're here. I was afraid you wouldn't come."

Something was wrong.

The sorceress really did seem to be glad to see her. But something felt off to her about the way the sorceress was acting.

"I never stick to just one plan," the sorceress continued. "I'd come up with quite a few alternatives in case any one of them failed, but here at the end, with success in my grasp, I started to realize I had neglected one small detail."

Kanako began walking towards the Black Tower. The closer she got, the greater the sense of wrongness grew.

"What do you mean?" she asked, uncertain of what the sorceress was talking about.

"I neglected to take steps to make sure you'd come here. I'd be utterly disgusted with myself if I'd come this far and failed to stick the landing."

"What would happen if I hadn't come here?" Kanako asked.

She realized part of what was off. The sorceress had always been blunt, but she had always seemed to be concerned about Kanako. There was none of that concern for her now. The sorceress wasn't

ignoring her completely, but Kanako had a nagging feeling that something about the way she was being treated had changed.

"There was a chance you might get pulled into the game and die, and the isekai would disappear," the sorceress said. "Besides, as the creator of this world, your powers are limitless; I couldn't have you running amok in the middle of the game. I should have ensured a way to get you off the game field and keep you safe."

"Game? What are you talking about?" Kanako asked. She had heard the announcement. There had been a similar setup in the story Kanako had meant to write, but she didn't know why the sorceress was going through with it.

"It's a little hobby of mine," said the sorceress. "I like to trap people in an area and make them kill each other in various ways."

Kanako paused. That was the last thing she had expected to hear the sorceress say.

"I have an ability that lends itself to the creation of these games, but it doesn't work on enclosed spaces I create myself," the sorceress went on. "I need someone else to create them for me. It's quite troublesome, and makes it hard to set up fields of any decent size. The most participants I've ever had in a game before was a few dozen."

"What are you..." It made no sense to her. Making people kill each other? Enclosed spaces? Abilities? Games? The words jumbled together in Kanako's mind, never fully parsing.

"I wanted to create a game on a larger scale," the sorceress said. "I was going to use the Evil God's power, but that plan hit a major setback, so I turned my attention on the school isekai enclosed space plan I had been working on, and what do you know? It all worked out. Thank you, Kanako Orihara. I couldn't have done it without you."

"I-I see... all right," Kanako stuttered. "But I don't care about that. I just want to go to an isekai. How can I make the whole world into an isekai? Please, tell me." Kanako didn't mind being used, just as long as she learned how to turn the whole world into an isekai.

"Don't you understand what I just said?" the sorceress asked. "I'm trying to say that I have no further use for you."

No further use for her? Why? Kanako couldn't understand.

"If you turned the whole world into an isekai, it would stop being an enclosed space," said the sorceress. "Why on Earth would I help you to do that?"

"But... you promised..." Kanako stumbled. The world was growing dark around her. If that was the case, then none of it meant anything.

"Promised?" the sorceress asked. "I told you how to do it already. If you can't do it, then it's just a sign you weren't powerful enough. Don't blame it on me. Here, I'll show you. Do you see something strange about how this castle is set up?"

The sorceress opened the door to the Black Tower. There was nothing inside. The floor, walls, and ceiling were gray, with only the windows and doors decorated in grand style.

It was only natural; Kanako hadn't decided what should go in the Black Tower yet. She couldn't bring to life a place she didn't know.

"Your setting is haphazard," said the sorceress. "How do you expect to rewrite the entire world with such a trivial imagination?"

"But... that means..." Kanako found herself wavering, then she fell to her knees.

"Did you really think the meager despair caused by your mother not loving you is power enough to change the world?" the sorceress mocked.

Meager? Meager, she'd said? All of Kanako's despair, her loneliness... and she'd called it meager?

Suddenly, it all made sense, and something inside Kanako snapped.

She let out a moan of agony, and swung the staff in her hands, even while still on her knees.

Immediately, shards of ice appeared in the hallway.

They were smaller than the icy weapons that Rochefort had crafted — more like little knives than spears — but they filled the hall.

"That's not good," the sorceress muttered. "'Inviolable Domain' doesn't prevent suicide..."

Suicide? Kanako didn't realize what the woman had meant by that, at first. Then, she realized that the tip of the ice knives were pointed towards her.

"Attacks like that won't work against Outers," the sorceress said. "Your failure was a foregone conclusion, but it seems you were particularly unlucky. I hope you can still stop them. I'd prefer you to remain alive too, after all..."

Shocked out of her anger towards the sorceress, Kanako froze.

Stop them? She didn't know how. She didn't actually know how to control her magic.

"Stop! Disappear!" she screamed.

As if taking that as the trigger, the knives of ice fired off towards Kanako.

If she had racked her brain, she might have thought of a way to stop it. But the minute she saw that wall of ice knives, Kanako's heart gave up. She lost her ability to think of anything, and closed her eyes tight.

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Yuichi ran for the oncoming barrage of ice knives.

"Orihara! Put up a wall of ice to block them!" Mutsuko called out

from behind him, but Kanako probably couldn't hear her.

Protect Kanako. Yuichi felt time slow down as he focused his mind on that one task.

The ice blades slowly came for Kanako. Kanako knelt, immobile, eyes closed. Makina watched, brow knitted, from some distance away.

He was too far away. He wouldn't make it like this. The icy blades were going to run Kanako through.

But Yuichi had the power to overturn despair, and a method for breaking through seemingly insurmountable situations.

Furukami!

Yuichi stretched his power past its limits, and kicked off the floor with all of his might. The flagstones broke away and went flying off behind him. He brought his body as low as it could go, sailed across the floor, grabbed Kanako, and rolled.

The rain of ice knives came a millisecond later.

Yuichi sat up and looked at Kanako in his arms. Her eyes were squeezed tightly shut, but she didn't seem hurt.

Yuichi let out a sigh of relief as he realized he had made it in time.

Kanako, as if only just noticing that she was still alive, slowly opened her eyes. "Sakaki the Younger..."

"Orihara... are you okay?" he asked.

"What's wrong?! You're covered in blood..." Kanako paled as she registered Yuichi's current state.

There was a broken ice knife sticking out of his left arm, the result of prioritizing Kanako's protection over dodging. It had impaled him, then broken off during his roll, which had resulted in terrible damage to his left arm. He probably wouldn't be able to move it for a while.

"I'll be fine," he said. "This is nothing compared to the punishments Sis dishes out."

"R-Really?" Kanako looked at him questioningly.

"Yeah," he said sincerely, thinking back on her previous punishments. "Sis does worse than this without batting an eye. So seriously, it's fine."

He could hear Mutsuko shouting objections behind him, but Yuichi ignored her. He was also hiding the fact that his left leg was in serious pain from how he'd strained it.

"Oh, thank goodness. I thought I might have to change the rules for what happens when you die," Makina said. She was standing a little ways away, in front of the Black Tower. She sounded relieved, though she wasn't addressing anyone in particular.

Still holding Kanako in his arms, Yuichi glared at Makina.

He'd pushed himself too hard. He could still move if he had to, but he wanted to conserve energy for as long as his opponent

remained still, and focus on recovering.

"It's lucky for me that Kanako Orihara didn't die, but what are you people doing here?" Makina asked. "You should be playing the game inside the school with the others."

"If you didn't want us here, you should have forbidden it with some special rule," Yuichi said.

"You're right, I should have done that," Makina agreed. "Even if I assigned it now, it wouldn't apply retroactively, so it wouldn't get you out of the castle. But I *can* do this."

She stepped into the Black Tower, then turned back to Yuichi and the others, and spoke her words of power.

"I'm adding new rules. Anyone who leaves the hallway linking the Black and White Towers will die. The exception is Kanako Orihara. If she leaves, she will merely lose consciousness and be immobilized until the game ends."

Makina was just stating a few rules, but that by itself seemed to change the air around them. Yuichi's instincts were telling him that her words had become reality.

"That's a pretty roundabout method," said Yuichi. "Why don't you just say 'everyone dies'?"

Makina seemed to enjoy listening to the sound of her own voice, so Yuichi was hoping he could get her to talk a little more about her game. At least, if she did, he could buy a little time.

"I can't imagine how buying time will help you, so I'll explain," she said. "My power has limitations regarding rules of death. I can't set rules that mean unavoidable instant death. And the reason I made Kanako Orihara an exception is that if she dies, the school isekai will disappear. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"So you could make it happen with the right combination of rules," he said. Even if instant death was forbidden, there were easy ways around that. Having limitations on the rules was no reason not to just kill them.

"It's true that I could do it, if I wanted to set rules just to kill you," she said. "That's not my style, though. I much prefer situations where a game that could be solved with some consideration is bulled through thoughtlessly, until at the very end, the participants realize how they *should* have done it, and die in despair. Or one where people *could* solve the game easily if they all worked together, but they betray each other one after another and end up destroying each other... that sort of thing. If I want to see that, the games have to be winnable."

"That's no reason not to kill *us*, though," he said. "Besides, we can't take part in the game if we're trapped here."

"I was instructed not to interfere with you, Yuichi Sakaki," she said. "So I can't just kill you. Of course, you're still participants in the

game, so you'll die in a few hours either way." Makina's expression was bored now; she seemed to be getting tired of answering Yuichi's questions.

Then, something completely unforeseen happened.

Natsuki Takeuchi was in the Black Tower.

Yuichi noticed her first, and just as he did, the battle began. Makina noticed her next, and when she did, the battle ended.

Natsuki had moved up behind Makina silently to strike her with her scalpel. It was a flawless surprise attack. Makina didn't see the attack coming, and should have been ripped to pieces, helplessly.

But Natsuki's scalpel missed.

The attack that had been aimed at her neck slid off in a random direction. Despite her shock, Natsuki tried to regain her initiative, but Makina struck out with a back kick, hitting her in the solar plexus and sending her flying. Natsuki bounced off the wall of the tower, and then lay still.

"Takeuchi!" Yuichi shouted.

It had been only one kick. It would require a more powerful attack than that to kill her, but it was enough to send her into a heap on the floor.

"Oops, I let my guard down," Makina said. "I didn't realize there were more of you. It's true that under the rule I just added, you'd be safe coming in through a route other than the hallway. Still, violence means nothing in the face of 'Inviolable Domain.'"

"Where did that kick come from?" Yuichi demanded. It didn't seem like the kind of move a teacher would be capable of.

"I study martial arts to amuse myself," said Makina. "I don't take it particularly seriously, but I have lived for a very long time. I'd say I've reached master level by now. By the way, I can bypass 'Inviolable Domain' myself, which is the reason I could hit her."

Her words heaped despair on top of despair. If he left the hall, he would die. His enemy was protected by an invincible force field, she was a martial arts expert, and she could add new rules whenever she wanted to.

"Sorry... younger Sakaki... I've been so stupid..." Kanako said weakly as she pressed her face into Yuichi's chest. She must have felt that it was all her fault.

"It's okay... I never realized you'd been through so much..." Yuichi was regretting the superficial way he'd always looked at Kanako. If they'd talked more, if they'd been closer, maybe she wouldn't have been driven to this.

"How upsetting. You make it sound like you think you could have done something," Makina objected, seeming offended by his words. "Kanako Orihara. This has all been set in stone since before you were

born. Your mother's personality came as the result of my manipulations, as was the fact that you were born a girl, and the way your mother treated you. I'm the one who made you like isekai stories, and the one who made you decide to become a writer. And of course, I made your debut as an author possible. Do you really think that a little nothing like you could have ever been published without my hand guiding the way? What I'm saying is that you are who you are as the result of my continuous manipulation of your destiny." Makina said it all as if she were bragging.

"Why... why me?" Kanako stumbled. "Why my..."

"Don't get the wrong idea," Makina said carelessly. "It's true that I manipulated your destiny, and things turned out this way as a result. I'm sure it sounds like I'm boasting of my skill. But as you know, destiny is not always cooperative. Things never go exactly as you plan them. That's why I do this same exact thing whenever I have the chance to. It's mere coincidence that you turned out this way, yet I want appreciation for the effort I put in to guide you to it. Still, I don't want you to just look at the result and think that you're special. This is fully the result of a lot of hard work, and it's frustrating to hear people claim otherwise. That's all that I'm saying."

"But... then I..." Kanako spoke, unable to find the words.

Yuichi was speechless.

He didn't want to understand what it was that Makina was trying to do, but he did. She was saying that she had twisted Kanako's entire destiny, all to create her stupid game here at the school. And she was hinting that she had played with the destinies of others the same way she had played with Kanako's.

"Perhaps it's bad form to say this only after I've succeeded, but I think it went very well," said Makina with satisfaction. "Your misery levels were just perfect. It would have been easy to make you more miserable, but humans are strange creatures. They can adjust to too much misery. Some even grow stronger in adversity, although most of them break down or kill themselves. I suppose this is proof that a light hand is necessary. Everything in moderation! An insensitive and neglectful mother appears to be just the right formula for making a person just a little bit depressive. Maybe that twisted depression is necessary for a writer to be successful, as well."

Why was Makina saying all of this? There was no reason for her to say it all out loud.

Just as Yuichi was about to ask her, he realized that Kanako was crying.

"What... what's the point of living? If destiny... if it's all set in stone... then what's the point of living?" she choked out. It was hard to make out the words between her sobs, but he could tell that she

was devastated.

"Orihara..." Yuichi couldn't think of what to say to her. He knew that even if he could, she probably wouldn't hear him.

"Why are you telling us this?! This has nothing to do with your game!" Yuichi screamed back at Makina, trying to vent his anger.

It was one thing for Makina to brag about manipulating everything and achieving her goal. But why did she have to mock Kanako?!

"I thought I might get an amusing reaction," Makina responded simply. "I wondered how someone might react to learning that their whole life has been the result of someone else's machinations. But I'm disappointed. The bawling-your-eyes-out response is so cliché. If she'd gotten angry, now *that* might have been *slightly* amusing..."

Yuichi tried to scream, but the words caught in his throat. He was too angry to say anything.

"Ende likens the world to a story, but I believe it's more like a computer game," said Makina. "Who hasn't played a simulation RPG where they sent a unit that's grown useless unarmed onto the field to be slaughtered, or a romance adventure game where they picked the most irresponsible choices to see what would happen?"

Makina said all this without a trace of guilt. Perhaps she was trying to get an "amusing" reaction out of Yuichi, now. If that was the case, she had more than succeeded.

Yuichi was angry. There was enough rage coursing through him to meet all of Makina's perverted expectations.

Yet he forced that swelling, violent emotion down into the pit of his stomach, and stroked Kanako's hair gently.

"Orihara. I'm just an ordinary kid in high school," he said. "I won't claim to have understood the life you've lived, the suffering you've been through, or the sadness you must be feeling. I don't think it would help to say something superficial, like 'just put it behind you and keep living your life.' But... please don't say that destiny is set in stone."

"But... there's nothing we can do... I can't take it back... everyone's going to die... I'm sorry... it's my fault..." Kanako's response squeaked from her throat in fits and starts.

"Wait here." Yuichi laid Kanako down with a smile as she looked back up at him, tears streaming from her eyes. "I'm gonna go crush this jackass destiny of yours."

Yuichi stood up and fixed his eyes on Makina.

The claim that one would change destiny was usually just big talk. But this one time, it might be possible. There was a way to change destiny right in front of his eyes.

"It's true that I represent destiny right now, in a way," said

Makina. “Killing me would solve most of the problems you’re facing right now. But how will you do it? It might be interesting if you could, but you’re surely not so naive as to think I’m going to leave this room, are you?” She gazed at Yuichi from inside the tower.

If he left the corridor, he would die. That meant he couldn’t enter the tower.

And yet, dragging one leg behind him, Yuichi started walking towards her. His right leg was nearly useless, but it could just support his weight. His left arm was in a bad way, too.

“I thought I didn’t have to worry about you,” Yuichi said determinedly. “I thought that whatever you were doing, it was none of my business. Someone’s dying right now, somewhere in the world. Whether through an accident, premeditation, or simple malice, I thought, ‘These things happen.’”

He steadied his breathing. It was fine to be angry, he reminded himself, but he mustn’t let that swallow him up.

“But you people are different, aren’t you? Just because you’re bored and have time to kill... you use people like pieces on a board, toy with them, and erase them, claiming they’re just ‘stories.’ You set yourselves up as gods and play with people’s destinies. You put them up on a low-rent stage, then jeer when they don’t amuse you.”

His every movement was a reminder of the pain his body was in. He was in awful shape. Yet he was confident that he could still call upon just enough power to pound her into the floor.

“Damn you people!” he snapped. “Who do you think you are? What do you think Orihara is? What people are? I’ve made a decision: I’m gonna crush each and every one of you! I’m gonna make it so you can never play your stupid games again!”

“That’s a nice head of steam you’ve got going, but it’s comical in the extreme,” said Makina. “Have you forgotten the situation you’re in? So blinded by your rage, you can’t see that all the realities of the world are standing in your way. Or do you think your anger will awaken something? Some convenient power to burst through the situation? If so, then by all means, try it... That would be interesting, in its own way.”

Makina continued to watch Yuichi from her position inside the tower. There was a faint smile on her lips. She must be quite interested in seeing what Yuichi had planned.

“I’m not going to awaken anything. I already have the power to crush you. Right here, right now.” Yuichi focused his power into his right arm. He was just going to walk up to her and punch her. That was the only thought in his mind.

“Now, wait just a minute, here...” Makina stared at Yuichi in disbelief. “Are you actually so stupid you’re just going to charge me,

blindly? I thought that you'd grasped the scope of my abilities."

"I made up my mind that I'm going to slug you," he answered. He could only do that if he was standing next to her; therefore, he had to walk up to her.

"It just seems such a boring way to die..." Makina said.

Yuichi set his left leg into the tower. If he left the corridor, he would die. Yuichi didn't care. He pulled his dragging right leg into the tower, too.

That instant, Yuichi's heart stopped.

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Makina watched it all happen, dumbfounded.

At first, she couldn't tell exactly what had just happened. She had to sort out the order of events in her mind.

Yuichi had entered the tower, and his heart had stopped. Then he had pounded his right fist into his chest.

"Uh?" Makina grunted now, slack-jawed, in a voice she almost didn't recognize as her own.

"I was wondering how it would come. Is that all it is?" Yuichi continued walking towards Makina, completely unfazed.

"How did you..."

"You think a person dies just because their heart stops beating?" Yuichi asked. "Give me a break."

"What are you talking about?!" she exclaimed.

If someone's heart stopped, they died. They just stopped moving. She considered that a fundamental law of the universe. The idea of something happening to contradict that had never entered her mind.

"With proper training, you can keep moving for a little while even after your heart stops," Yuichi said. "And if you can move, you can get your heart started again. It's pretty simple."

Yuichi stated this so matter-of-factly, Makina actually began to find it plausible. But... no, surely it wasn't possible. There was no way a person could restart their own heart.

"Yuichi Sakaki! If you move from that spot, you will die!" she commanded, setting a new rule for her closed space.

In a typical death game thriller, ridiculous rules were enforced onto the participants, but they were neutral and impartial. The story wouldn't work if they weren't; there was nothing interesting about a story where the rules kept changing on the fly.

But in Makina's case, such principles were self-imposed. She only employed them for her own amusement, which meant that if she felt like it, she could always change the rules at any time.

Makina waited for the power of her words to activate. But Yuichi kept walking forward.

This time, he didn't even act like his heart had stopped. He just kept walking towards Makina.

"Impossible..." she whispered. Why hadn't it worked?

Yuichi answered, as if he'd read her mind. "The same move won't work twice."

"Ah..." How could he claim that? Yet, Makina realized, there might be worldviews where such rules were in place. Yuichi Sakaki seemed to believe it as a fundamental law of the universe. For him, it went without saying. He didn't have a moment's doubt.

"Yuichi Sakaki cannot get within five meters of Makina Shikitani!" she shouted.

"To hell with your damn rules!" Yuichi barked, his voice loud enough to shake the tower.

Then, without a pause, he stepped within a five meter radius of Makina.

Makina was dumbstruck. She had no idea what was happening.

"I don't have to follow any stupid rules you set on a whim," said Yuichi. "What gives you the right to do that, anyway? Because you're an Outer? You have the power to control destiny? To hell with that! I don't have to go along with anything you say!"

What was playing out before Makina's eyes flipped her understanding of the world completely on its head. She had lived for a long time, and she had acquired enormous knowledge in that time, through experience. Yet nothing she had seen would have ever suggested that a person could nullify her powers solely with willpower and determination.

Yuichi arrived in front of Makina. He was within arm's reach now; close enough to strike.

"Do you really want to challenge me in hand-to-hand combat?" Makina demanded. "You saw me take out that student, didn't you?"

Yet Makina regretted the words even as she said them. Why did she have to speak so highly of herself?

"You really think master-level martial arts is enough to go toe-to-toe with me?" Yuichi replied, as if seeing right through her.

Right on the money. Makina had no faith that her meager martial arts skill could mount a challenge against Yuichi. He was a high school student with an injured left arm and a right leg that he was dragging behind him. Yet she was the one who didn't stand a chance.

"I-I'll take the girls behind you as hostages..." Her voice cracked. How long had it been since she'd felt this emotion? Long enough that she couldn't actually remember the last time.

"Go ahead and try," Yuichi said.

The girls behind him showed no sign of moving. They had put their faith entirely in Yuichi.

Makina couldn't use her ability to kill someone who wasn't moving. She couldn't set rules that resulted in unavoidable death.

Yuichi's eyes seemed tranquil as they rested on Makina, but he couldn't fully hide the fire burning behind them.

Makina was like a deer in the headlights. Yet, she remembered, she still had one final sanctuary.

Inviolable Domain, her protective barrier. Yuichi had already acknowledged its existence, so he shouldn't be able to break through it now.

Makina's confidence returned. This series of irregular events had almost caused her to lose her cool. But Makina was an Outer, a being who existed outside of destiny. She was not bound by a natural lifespan; if there was ever any chance for her to survive, no matter how slight, she would.

"You think you can't die?" Yuichi asked, reading her mind once again.

The way he kept doing that sent a chill up her spine. But once again, she reminded herself that it didn't matter. No matter what he said, he was still powerless against an immortal like her.

"I'm going to hit you with my ultimate strike," Yuichi said. "You can't dodge it. You can't block it. It's going to hit, and you're going to die. Which means you're at the end of your rope."

Surely, it's a bluff, Makina told herself. There was no move that powerful. No such technique existed within her vast storehouse of knowledge, especially since Yuichi had shown no sign of being able to defy her defensive rule.

Yuichi just stood there. He wasn't even in a fighting stance.

It snapped into place. If there was really an "ultimate strike," then naturally, it wouldn't have any special stance.

Fear.

She suddenly remembered the name of the feeling that had been monopolizing her heart all this time: the fear of death. That emotion she had forgotten for so long had now taken her as its prisoner.

Makina was terrified.

Yuichi Sakaki was just standing there, with arms at his sides, yet this terrified her from the bottom of her heart. Once she remembered the name of that feeling, it was like plunging backwards into an abyss.

Her legs trembled. Her heart pounded an alarm. Her breath grew short. Her eyes darted about.

It felt as if time had stopped.

Her entire body was on high alert, her every sense focused on detecting some sign of what Yuichi was about to do.

"Plea—" Even she wasn't sure what she was trying to say, yet the instant she opened her mouth, the words were cut off.

Yuichi's right fist was buried in her torso.

An invisible strike. He had not telegraphed it in any way, nor had she perceived the movement itself. It had pierced through her defensive membrane, eliminated any chance of dodging, broken her ribs, and buried itself deep in her trunk.

There was not a fragment of waste in the application of power. It was a direction of force almost bizarre in its straightforwardness, produced for no purpose but to deal a fatal blow.

A blow sufficient to take the life of Makina, of an Outer.

She couldn't escape.

Any possible chance of survival seemed to fly from her.

That lone strike would send Makina plummeting into the ravine of death.

*****

“That was a bluff, by the way!” Mutsuko said offhandedly.

“Huh? What?” Aiko and Mutsuko had been watching the battle since arriving at Kanako’s side.

“He called it ultimate, but it’s not, not really,” Mutsuko explained. “It’s not even close to complete, and he needs a lot more training! But see, the buildup declaration is part of the move. It puts the opponent on high alert. Then, when they’re tense all over, you strike!”

“Um, what about her defensive membrane thing? Shouldn’t it have bounced off of that?” Aiko asked as she tried to touch Mutsuko, finding she was able to do so without resistance. Makina’s defeat had loosened her power’s grip upon them.

“It seemed to be a force deflection field, so you just have to use a punch so straightforward that the force can’t be redirected,” said Mutsuko. “Well, that’s part of the ‘ultimate strike’ thing. It’s sort of like hitting a sphere at its very center!”

Aiko decided there was no point in acting shocked anymore, so she decided to ask about another point that had puzzled her. It was about Yuichi’s statement that you could move even after your heart stopped.

“I mean... wouldn’t having your heart stop kill you?” Aiko asked. That’s what her common sense told her, and it was likely that anyone would agree.

“You can keep moving for quite a while, even after your heart stops,” said Mutsuko. “I hear brown bears can keep moving around and attacking people after they’re shot in the heart, and a lion shot at 200 meters can still have enough force to pounce on a hunter!”

“Right, but... Sakaki is a human being...” Aiko faltered. To be frank, she was starting to doubt whether that were true.

“Even a human can move for about ten seconds, y’know?” said Mutsuko. “It’s just it’s hard to move properly unless you train for it. Without a flow of blood to the brain, you black out really quickly. Your body starts to stiffen and turns heavy, like you’re all tied up with weights. Your breathing turns shallow and it’s hard to fill your lungs, like you just ran the hundred meters while holding your breath, and when you finally try to breathe in, you don’t have the strength.”

“You make it sound like you’ve experienced it yourself...” Aiko could hardly believe her ears, but she had a sneaking suspicion that Mutsuko’s words had the weight of experience behind them.

“That’s woman power!” Mutsuko declared. “I’ve tried it a bunch of times! Hey, you want to have a near-death experience sometime too, Noro?”

“No, thank you. I’ll pass,” Aiko demurred forcefully. So her sneaking suspicion had been right.

“Human limits are a lot higher than you think!” Mutsuko proclaimed. “The key is just getting used to them! Training can let you move to some degree even after your heart stops, and there’s a huge difference in what you can do when you’re having your heart stopped for the first time, and after you’ve had a ton of experience with it!”

“Oh, okay. So it’s just a thing you have to get used to, huh?” Aiko deadpanned.

“He also has to train for how to stop his opponent’s heart, and that’s hard to get the hang of unless you train on yourself!” Mutsuko added excitedly. “It’s really useful practice for moving your body to its utmost limits, too! Hey, I bet Yu could get into the *Guinness Book of World Records* for number of times his heart stopped!”

It seemed to Aiko that Yuichi would probably not want to have that memorialized.

“Anyway, should we really be standing here talking about this?” Aiko asked. “Sakaki was acting so scary... do you think he really killed her?” She had no idea what had happened to Makina after he’d hit her.

“Well, it’s no skin off my nose if she dies, personally,” said Mutsuko. “But Yu’s a big softie, so he probably didn’t go that far! The stuff about killing was all part of the bluff!”

“Really?” Aiko asked, feeling relieved. Even from this distance, she could tell just how angry he had been. The thought that he might kill her hadn’t seemed implausible.

“Um, so what should we do? Should we go in there?” Aiko asked, pointing to the Black Tower. It seemed like they should check on how they were doing.

“I think it’s okay,” Mutsuko said. “Look, Yu’s back!”

Yuichi walked towards them, holding Natsuki in one arm. He gently laid her down next to the girls. His leg was feeling better, so he wasn’t dragging it anymore.

“Is it okay to assume the situation is resolved?” Yuichi checked with Mutsuko.

“Good question!” she answered. “It looks like Makina’s ability has lost effect, but what about this castle? It’s Orihara’s...”

Mutsuko trailed off as she looked up at the ceiling. Dust and small pebbles were starting to rain down on them.

“Orihara, do you know what’s going on?” Yuichi asked, nervously. If this castle was the product of Kanako’s imagination, she should have some idea.

“Um... I feel like it’s slipped out of my hands... I don’t feel like I

can use magic anymore...” Kanako said, apologetically. The label above her head had returned to “Isekai Fanatic.”

The corridor let out a creak. The floor began to undulate, as if the hall were twisting around them. One of the pillars fell, letting out a leaden sound, and larger pieces of rubble began to fall.

“Ah, how to put it... I feel like we’ve been through this before?” Aiko said, and they all traded a look.

“It’s breaking down! What a cliché!” Mutsuko cried, with a strange note of delight in her voice.

“Sis, take Takeuchi and go on ahead!” Yuichi shouted.

“Hey! What are you gonna do, Yu?”

“I’m going to get Shikitani,” he said. “She might be a creep, but I couldn’t sleep at night knowing I’d left her to die.”

“What about the damage you took?” Mutsuko asked.

“As long as I’m not dead, I can keep going. I’ll be fine. You know that much, right?” Yuichi said, smiling confidently.

“Yeah! I know that best of all, even if you don’t tell me! So, let’s go! I’ll carry Takeuchi!” Mutsuko hefted Natsuki onto her back and began to stride towards the White Tower without looking back. Aiko started to follow her, then noticed that Kanako wasn’t next to her anymore.

“Orihara?” Aiko turned back.

Kanako had run past Yuichi, and for some reason, she was heading for the Black Tower.

“Noro! Let Yu handle her! Let’s go!” Mutsuko called.

“O-Okay!” Despite her hesitance, Aiko seemed to decide to trust Yuichi, and she hurried along her way.

Yuichi pursued Kanako in a panic.

He wasn’t at his best right now, and moving around took a lot of effort. He could probably move all right if he wrung out the last of his power, but this didn’t seem like the time for that yet.

As he arrived inside the Black Tower, he could see the gray walls and ceiling beginning to crumble. He could see the school building, inverted, through the cracks in the walls.

Kanako was standing next to Makina, holding her staff aloft.

It would be easy for him to jump out and stop her. But he didn’t. She wouldn’t die from one hit with a staff. And in his opinion, given what Makina had done to her, Kanako had the right to strike her.

Kanako shut her eyes tight and swung the staff down. But it didn’t hit Makina.

The staff suddenly disappeared in a puff of smoke, and Kanako’s witch outfit followed.

Kanako opened her eyes and looked around in panic.

Yuichi walked up to Kanako's side. "Orihara. If you really want her to pay for what she did, let me do it. You don't need to dirty your own hands."

"I don't know... suddenly, the idea that it's all her fault... it's all stopped seeming real. But..." she rambled, sounding disoriented. It was probably hard for her to know what to be angry at.

"I know it's not my place to suggest this... but why not focus on the future?" Yuichi asked. "I don't think she'll interfere in your destiny anymore. And if you have anything more to say to her, you can give her an earful after she wakes up."

Yuichi knew that there were probably better ways to comfort the girl, but this was the best he could think of.

"There are probably other people like her," Kanako said worriedly. "If they come after me, will you protect me again, Yuichi?"

"I'll pound every one of them into the dirt," Yuichi promised, relieved that Kanako wasn't inclined to argue. "I'll keep proving that destiny is what we make of it."

Even so, the castle was falling apart as they spoke. Yuichi looked towards the tower door, and saw that the corridor had completely collapsed. There was no way they could reach the roof of the school like this.

The Black Tower itself was already half gone. He could see night sky through the floor. If they fell from here, gravity might reverse, and they'd end up back in the castle.

Yuichi hefted Makina up on one arm, then tossed her through a hole in the wall.

"Huh?" Kanako's mouth fell open in shock.

He had to acknowledge that it probably did look a little heartless, even if he had just punched her in the stomach.

"It's okay," he reassured her. "We're not up that high, and she's hard to kill."

Yuichi looked up to check that Makina was "falling" towards the athletics field above them, and it seemed that the gravity did indeed reverse the minute they left the castle walls. Makina hit the field, but there was no explosion of blood around her, suggesting that she was probably still alive.

"Orihara, are you okay with jumping down?" he asked, though even if she said she wasn't, they didn't have much of a choice.

Fortunately, Kanako nodded obediently, and walked up to Yuichi.

"I'll be holding you, so you'll be safe," Yuichi said. "Yeah, that's right. Like you held me before— huh?"

Kanako was squeezing him tightly. It wasn't really any different from what Aiko had done when he'd jumped off the roof with her, but this time — perhaps because he had more time to think about it — it

made him feel a little self-conscious.

“Okay. Ready?” He wrapped Kanako’s legs around his waist, then jumped out from the wall.

Immediately, gravity reversed, and they fell towards the athletic field.

It was his second time and he was used to it, so Yuichi easily reoriented himself and hit the ground with his five-point fall.

“Are you okay?” Yuichi asked. He set Kanako down on the ground and checked her over.

“Yeah... falling wasn’t as bad as I imagined it.” Kanako smiled.

Yuichi, feeling bashful, looked up at the sky. As the upside-down castle crumbled, it also became fainter, slowly fading into the night sky.

Yuichi let out a breath of relief. It seemed like it was all over.

He looked back to the school and saw Mutsuko and Aiko running towards them.

Epilogue 1: Say Hello to the New Love Interest!

It was two days later, on Wednesday. Yuichi was walking to school with Aiko.

“Hey, how are your injuries?” Aiko asked in concern.

“They’re in the realm of okay, I think,” Yuichi said. His left arm was capable of moving again. It was a little sore, still, but he could more or less use it. His right leg had already healed completely the day before. The damage he inflicted on himself with furukami was relatively easy to recover from. Maybe despite surpassing his limits, he had still kept enough power in reserve to accelerate the healing.

“It’s all back to normal after everything that happened. It almost feels unreal...” Aiko looked around in disbelief as they walked through the school gate.

The events Kanako and Makina had set in motion had sent a shockwave through the whole school. Yet, the impact didn’t seem to have lasted at all. They’d been given Tuesday off, but now that the school was back to normal, it was as if nothing had happened. About the only people affected were the clubs that used the gym, who couldn’t use it again until repairs were complete.

The incidents of the day before had been written off as a prank played by the students who’d stayed at the school because of the fog. The chaos had continued late into the night, but when the teachers — who had been in a deep sleep for some reason — woke up, they had gotten everything under control. They obviously couldn’t have just held classes the next day as if nothing had happened, so the students had been given the day off; however, with no lasting issues in sight, they’d been told they’d resume normal classes on Wednesday.

“It seems like not many people even remember what happened,” Yuichi commented. Very few people seemed to remember how the other world had begun to merge with theirs, or that they had been forced to play that bizarre game. The ones that did remember couldn’t prove it, so they just gradually stopped talking about it.

“This is the world’s ability to normalize itself!” Mutsuko announced, looking somewhat surprised and somewhat gleeful.

According to Monika, this had really been a small-scale incident in the grand scheme of things. Outers sometimes triggered huge disasters in which thousands of people died.

But even in those cases, since most of humanity shared the same worldview, they usually just wrote it off as something more "plausible," like a large earthquake or a hurricane.

Which meant that Outers had caused the deaths of thousands many times before, all for the purpose of their own amusement.

I talked pretty big, saying I'd pound them all into the dirt, but I don't know how to do it, Yuichi thought.

For now, he'd just have to help Monika collect the Divine Vessels. It seemed like there were quite a few Outers involved in that war, after all.

"What's with the foreboding expression?" Aiko asked with a frown.

"Huh? Do I have one? Sorry..." Yuichi said. He hadn't realized he'd been scowling, but he apologized anyway. His anger towards the Outers must have been showing on his face.

They arrived in the classroom, and after a while, the substitute teacher showed up. The man said that Makina hadn't arrived yet.

Yuichi figured she probably wouldn't come back. She likely had no more use for the school.

Class proceeded as normal. After class, Natsuki approached Yuichi's desk.

"Club?" he asked.

"Yes, but would you accompany me for training afterwards?" she asked.

"Oh? The occasional morning visit isn't enough for you?"

"If I don't do something, I'll end up the same way the next time this happens." Natsuki sounded strangely sulky. She must have felt sensitive about being swatted aside so easily by Makina.

"Hmm, I don't know how I feel about you getting too strong..." Yuichi murmured, feeling hesitant about the idea of making a serial killer stronger. "But okay."

He decided to trust Natsuki. She had laid low with the serial killing since she'd started sparring with him, and he couldn't remain suspicious of her forever.

As they were talking, Aiko arrived, and the three of them headed off for club together.

"I wonder why we're all just sitting here, doing nothing," Yuichi muttered impatiently as he sat in the club room, bored to death.

"I guess because we don't have a topic yet," Aiko offered. Since the club was Mutsuko's, they couldn't do anything without her there.

Natsuki had a surgical tool catalog open and was poring through it with great interest.

"...going off on your own path?" Yuichi asked her.

"What's your opinion on disposable-tip scalpels?" Natsuki asked,

casually.

"Am I *supposed* to have an opinion on disposable-tip scalpels?" Yuichi didn't even know such a thing existed before now.

"Personally, I think there's no need to be fixated on scalpels!" The door burst open, and Mutsuko strode in. "If any blade will do, how about some sabers? C'mon, Yu wanted them earlier, so I prepared a few sets!"

Mutsuko marched up to the whiteboard and plonked the large bag she was holding onto the table.

"I didn't want them," Yuichi said quickly. "I'm never going to wear those things."

"Aw, but you wanted them earlier!" Mutsuko cried.

"If you'd had them then, I would have used them! I don't actually *want* them!"

"C'mon! Behold, the dull shine of this blade!" Mutsuko unleashed the saber attached to her forearm, causing the blade to extend along her arm with a clink. It could have been a toy, except the blade in use gave off a cold, sharp glint. "I remodeled it from last time! By adjusting the angle of the edge, I've given it 30% more cutting power!"

"So? Do the remodels give you the ability to sheath the blade once it's out?" Yuichi looked at Mutsuko, eyes as cold as ice.

"Nice one, Yu... you hit me right where it hurts," Mutsuko confessed. "True, that's the saber's lone weakness... but objecting to every little thing makes you sound like a brother-in-law, you know! You should be a man and not sweat the little details!"

"It's not a little detail! And if that's its weakness, you shouldn't unsheathe it that casually!"

"Fine! If you insist, I'll make it retractable!" Mutsuko said with a pout.

Once that conversation seemed to be settled, Yuichi turned his eyes towards the entrance of the room, where he had sensed someone watching them for a while. It was Kanako, who was peeking in at them through the wide-open door.

"What's wrong, Orihara?" he asked.

"Um... I'm not sure if I'm welcome..."

"Come on in. We don't mind." It was perhaps presumptuous for Yuichi to speak for them all, but he couldn't imagine why any of them would mind.

Kanako stepped in, apologetically. With all that had happened, it was only natural that she'd be self-conscious, but he hoped that that would resolve in time.

Maybe it would happen if they just interacted like normal. Yuichi looked at Kanako again, then did a double take.

“Love Interest III” was now the label above Kanako’s head.

That made her the third one, after Aiko and Natsuki. Yuichi didn’t understand why this was happening.

Kanako timidly entered the room and sat down next to Yuichi. “Yuichi, I’m sorry about before. Do you want to go out again sometime? To, um, finish what we started...”

Aiko’s eyes went wide, and Yuichi watched as she bolted to her feet. “C-Could I come with you? It’s just for research, right? There’s no reason you have to be alone, right?!”

“Noro, I’m sorry. It’s date research, so we really need our space...” Kanako hugged Yuichi’s arm, pressing her generous breasts showily up against it.

“A d-d-d-date?! Th-Then I’ll go on a date with Sakaki, and you can watch what we do! Yeah, that’s for the best! That lets you get objective research done!” Aiko cried.

“Noro... what are you talking about?” Yuichi asked, baffled.

“Noro, I really am sorry,” Kanako said. “I’m more interested in subjective research.”

Her response seemed to paralyze Aiko.

“Sakaki, there’s a medical tool trade fair called Medix coming up. Do you want to go with me?” Natsuki asked. Even she seemed to be joining in now.

“Takeuchi... you’re really still thinking about scalpels?” Yuichi asked.

“Ah! As your big sister, I’m not sure how I feel about you becoming a playboy, Yu!” Mutsuko declared.

As annoyed as Yuichi was about all of this, he was soon to find out that this was only the beginning.

He had no idea that even more annoying potential love interests were still waiting in the wings.

Epilogue 2: No Four Fiends, But There Is a Hero

"Oh, Yurimaru. How could you just die like that?"

Yurika heard the voice, then awakened. She saw an arched ceiling above her. Her back felt stiff and achy, and when she checked what she was lying on, she realized it was something long, hard, and wooden, like a bench.

Groggily, she sat up.

She didn't know where she was. Since she had just woken up, that meant she must have gone to sleep somewhere, but her memory was fuzzy.

She looked around. The area around her seemed to be a church, with lines of pews and an altar with a large cross hanging over it. Yurika's makeshift bed was a pew in the front row.

She looked to the altar, where the voice had come from, and saw a man dressed in black, wearing a cross around his neck. She assumed he must be a priest.

"Yurimaru... you mean me?" Yurika asked. It was the first question on her mind. Her full name was Yurika Maruyama, but no one had ever called her by that nickname.

"Yes. That is your hero name." The man's voice was calm and gentle. Yurika decided he must be a very good priest.

"Hero... hero, hero..." she murmured. There was something familiar about that word. She'd heard it somewhere just a little while ago. After rolling it around in her mouth for a while, she remembered.

Yuichi Sakaki had called her that. Remembering that caused other memories to come flooding back to her.

"Huh? Am I dead?!" Yurika gasped. She remembered being hit into a wall by a man. She had fallen, then had her head crushed. She was sure he had killed her.

Yurika quickly checked herself over. There wasn't a single injury; she was the picture of health. Even if she had, by some miracle, survived, it was unthinkable that she should be unharmed.

"You died, and came back to life," the priest said to her. His voice was utterly solemn; he didn't seem like the joking type.

"Are you serious?" Yurika burst out. "Who are you, anyway?"

Yurika's initial impression — baseless though it was — had been that the priest was a good person. It was only now that she finally

decided to be cautious.

"My name is Kiryu," the man said. "I serve you, O hero who stands against the revival of the Evil God."

"Huh? You're part of this Evil God business, too?" she demanded. All Yurika knew about the Evil God was that it was the source of the power dwelling in her right arm, and that there were villainous types in a frenzy searching for his body parts.

"I am sorrowed to hear you speak that way," the man said. "I suppose I am part of it, in that I am opposed to the Evil God."

"You said I died, right?" Yurika demanded. "Then what am I doing here?"

"Because you are a hero," the man said. "A hero can come back as many times as is needed to vanquish great evil, can they not?"

"No, no, no. That's only in video games!" Yurika didn't know much about games, but it sounded like the kind of thing you'd hear in a game that revived you instead of giving you a game over.

"You have the power of a born hero," the man declared. "Whenever you die, you will always be miraculously resurrected in a church."

"What?! I had no idea!" she cried.

"Certainly not. A hero never knows what they are until they die."

"...Fine," Yurika muttered. "Can we talk about something else now?" The hero talk still sounded fishy to her, but she knew they wouldn't get anywhere arguing about it.

The priest nodded.

"I have the Evil God's right arm. Does that make us enemies?" Yurika asked.

"What you have done was unavoidable. In order to interrupt the ritual of the Evil God's resurrection, you had no choice but to participate in the ritual."

"The person who gave me this said that if you bring together the Evil God's body, you'll get a wish granted," she said. "What about that?"

"I cannot allow that to happen," the man said. "The condition for having a wish granted is to gather all parts of the Evil God except his soul. The risk is too great. In other words, my goal of stopping the God's revival is mutually exclusive to your goal, hero."

"I never said that was what I wanted... I guess it's fine," she said. "All I wanted to do was play superhero for a bit. So? What do you want to do? Force me to cut ties with him? Is there some benefit to me for doing so?"

"No, I will not ask anything of you," the man said. "My role is merely to ensure your safe resurrection. The power of my church building is indispensable to your ability."

"...Can I go for now, then?" she asked. She was starting to worry that she might be confined to the church.

"You may do as you wish," the man said.

"By the way, where are we?" Yurika asked.

The address the priest gave her was a little ways away from the town where Yurika lived. She'd have to ride a train back.

She was taking out her wallet to make sure she had her IC card with her when she noticed that something felt off. Her wallet felt a bit lighter and thinner than usual. She quickly checked it and, indeed, found it much emptier than before.

"Hey! Care to explain this?" she cried. There were only the two of them there, which meant that the priest must have been the one who took her money.

"It is only natural," the priest declared, without a trace of shame. "When a hero is revived, they always lose half of their money on hand. That is the rule, is it not?"

*****

"So Makina lost, eh?" a voice asked.

"Heh... Makina is the weakest of us Outers."

"To lose to a mere human. It's a disgrace to our very name."

Ende groaned internally as she listened to the theatrical voices. Was it really necessary to keep the room so dark? She couldn't read the next page in her book.

It would be easy to turn on a light, or to drive out the ones playing their silly game. But Ende realized that that wouldn't be fair. Outers generally had so little to do. If they had found a way to alleviate the boredom a little bit, she didn't want to interrupt them.

"Oh? Would you like to try me?" a new voice asked.

At the sound of the new voice, the lights flicked on. The darkness cleared instantly, revealing a room haphazardly strewn with bookshelves and books.

Makina Shikitani was standing at the entrance to the room. At the middle of the room sat three people, facing each other.

Ende looked across the room from the corner where she was sitting atop a fallen bookshelf, a finger marking her place in a book she was in the middle of reading.

"Erk! Makina!" the "Ideal Future in Which All Are Saved" girl stammered at the sight of her.

"Er, ah, we were enjoying a bit of 'four fiends' roleplay. We don't really think of you that way..." the "Fluffy Daily Life World" man said, apologetically.

"But it's true that you've disgraced yourself! How could you lose to a human and come back with your tail between your legs?!" the

third Outer demanded. Only he, the “Ultimate Cosmic Battle Saga” boy, continued to lay into Makina.

“Want to complain, do you?” Makina said. “Try me. Show me your strike that can punch galaxies away.”

Makina did not flinch; in fact, she seemed quite up to the challenge.

“I-I never said I could do that!” the boy dissembled. His fear of the woman almost seemed instinctive.

They must have known that they couldn’t beat Makina here.

Ende turned her attention back to the book in her hand. She’d just gotten to the part where Yuichi Sakaki picked Kanako Orihara up in his arms and jumped out of the castle. She reckoned that she was nearly at the end of the story.

“Is your injury healed?” Ende asked as Makina approached her, without looking up from her book.

“As long as it’s not instant death, I can always work something out,” Makina replied. “I believe you’re aware of that.”

“Yes, I am. But that is the way people show concern, isn’t it?” Ende asked. She hadn’t actually been worried at all, but she’d thought it important to at least make a superficial show of concern.

“Why didn’t my abilities work on him? Who is he... who is Yuichi Sakaki?” Makina asked.

Just as Ende had anticipated, Makina had come back to ask that question.

“Hmm,” Ende said. “I thought I told you not to interfere with Yuichi Sakaki. I wonder how you interpreted that...”

“Well...” Makina trailed off.

Finding her hesitance unusual, Ende looked up from her book.

Makina’s sour expression gave Ende a clear hint as to her reason.

“I see,” Ende said. “You thought I just liked him? And despite thinking that, you still did what you did. You’re a nasty person.”

“I’m not as nasty as you are.”

“Fair enough,” said Ende. “I’ll give you that, at least in regards to this most recent incident. I should have said this: You can’t beat Yuichi Sakaki. If you don’t want to die, lie low for a while. The minute Kanako Orihara became involved with the Sakaki siblings, your plan’s chance of success was nil. The turning point was an incident that took place on a roof one summer vacation. What I’m saying is, the fact that the first line of this book is about Kanako’s first meeting with Mutsuko made it clear that your plan was doomed to failure.” Ende lightly waved the book in her hand. “But I suppose even saying that wouldn’t have stopped you.”

Makina let out a sigh of defeat. Outers tended to be overly self-confident, and Makina probably had thought that she alone would be

immune.

"Now, as for why your abilities didn't work?" Ende asked. "It's simple. You ended up thinking, 'This might not work,' didn't you? The moment Yuichi Sakaki revived himself, your worldview was shaken. It was then consumed by his own. That's how worldviews work. Strength comes from certainty. When certainty wavers, your worldview becomes open to distortion."

"Ah... I see," Makina said. "Even though I'm an Outer, I become just another character in a story..."

Ende had assumed she would argue, but Makina was surprisingly receptive to the idea.

"Now, as for your other question: what Yuichi Sakaki is... Let's say he's the vessel for Mutsuko Sakaki's hopes and dreams," Ende said. "He fights as she wishes, and breaks through everything. Some might see this as beautiful sibling love, whereas others might see it as vile brainwashing. I believe much of his strength comes from humanity's shared ideas about hard work being a virtue... at least, that's the feeling I have. To be honest, there's still a lot I don't know. Now, I'd like to ask this. How does it feel to lose?" Ende swiftly changed the subject, looking at Makina with curious eyes.

"Is that what you were after?" Makina demanded. "You must have realized I wouldn't be killed, then."

"That's right," said Ende. "It's not rare for an Outer to disappear after they lose, especially when Outers fight each other. Very few of us lose and then live to tell the tale. You're the only one I've ever heard of, so I'm curious. Now, tell me, please. I've been quite cooperative with you, haven't I?"

"'How does it feel,' eh?" Makina mused. "It's refreshing, in a way. I don't feel any particular anger or desire for revenge. I do feel some fear towards Yuichi Sakaki... but we reached a compromise about that."

It was not what Ende had predicted, but it did sound like it was how Makina really felt. Though it was contrary to her expectations, Ende found that interesting.

"So you won't be needing this, then?" Ende plucked something round out of her pocket. It was a sphere with a white porcelain shine, just large enough to be held between two of her fingers.

"An eye? I thought Monika Sakurazaki had both." Makina gazed curiously at the sphere in Ende's palm.

Monika had had the right one from the start. The left had been held by Makina's servant, but Yuichi Sakaki had taken it, and it was now in Monika's hands, too.

"This is the Evil God's upper eye. Why should a divine being look exactly like a human?" Ende said, smugly. "If you want it, I'll give it

to you. You could take part in the Evil God's story again."

"I don't need it anymore," Makina said simply.

Perhaps she really had had a change of heart, Ende observed. The old Makina would have wanted it.

"I see," Ende mused as she rolled the Evil God's eye around in her palm. "What to do, then? Maybe someone else will want it..."

She had been hoping to liven up the story a little bit by baiting Makina, and so she couldn't immediately think of a better way to use it.

"...I know," Ende said, with a smile that was brimming with curiosity. "Maybe I'll join in myself? I'd love to see what the completed Evil God looks like, after all..."

Afterword

I'm terribly sorry for the long wait.

Here's volume 4, at last.

I'm very grateful that I can keep telling this story. I owe it to the encouragement of you, the readers. Thank you all so much.

But as I reach volume four, I'm running out of things to say in the afterwords. It would be one thing if something interesting had happened, but things have been pretty uneventful here.

I went around sampling ramen from different restaurants, but all I can say is that Tenka Ippin's was the best, so the story doesn't really go anywhere. Hey, you think Tenka Ippin might send me some free merchandise for saying that? I heard that happened for some old shonen manga. They would get large shipments of things they featured prominently in their manga. Of course, I'd rather not get sent the entire Captains of Crush gripper series... though actually, maybe I would take them!

I never write about what happened in the current volume, so maybe I'll talk about what happened last volume. I don't think that will spoil anything. No one's going to be starting with volume 4... right?

Remember the liu he da qiang? The spear that appeared in volume 3? I tried swinging one around as research. Of course, it was made out of wood, not some special alloy.

What's that? You're surprised that I do research for this silly story of mine? Actually, I do quite a lot of investigating of various concepts and materials. The research doesn't always make it into the story, of course...

The liu he da qiang is also known as the "Six Harmonies Spear." You might be wondering what the six harmonies are. It refers to the four cardinal directions, plus heaven and earth. In other words, it represents the entire world around us. It basically means it's a really cool spear that can take on the whole world. That might sound like a pretty pompous name, but that sort of thing was pretty common in Medieval China.

I've also heard the theory that it refers to the three internal harmonies and three external harmonies from Chinese philosophy. What are those, you might ask? Well, if I get into that, we'll be here forever, so if you're curious, you can look it up.

Anyway, I tried swinging the spear around, but it's not something

a novice can master overnight. Just holding it right took me all I had. Once I started swinging it around, I began to want one for myself, but they are three meters long. It would be hard to find a place to keep it.

If I make a lot of money, maybe I'll get a house with a lawn where I can do spear practice.

Now, the usual routine.

To my editor, I was a real handful here in volume four. I'm really sorry about that.

And to my illustrator, An2A. Thanks for wonderful illustrations once again.

Next up is volume 5.

I think I'll be able to get this one out without you having to wait very long... but I'm not sure...

Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

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by Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

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Original Japanese edition published in 2014 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2017 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2017